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AND ALL DISASTROUS THINGS

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

A sudden crisis can mould even the toughest criminals into a co-ordinated fighting unit—when Earth is threatened.

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

LATIMER stumbled heavily and fell from the ramp to the frozen rocks. His hand went automatically to his belt. But the spacesuit he was wearing had no belt, neither had it the holster and the pistol that for so long had seemed part of himself. Weaponless, Latimer lay where he had fallen, snarled wordlessly at the guard whose farewell shove had caused him to lose his balance, at the vast bulk of *Charon* like some dull-gleaming tower blotting out the bright stars.

For long minutes he lay there. He was aware that the airlock door in *Charon's* side had shut, that the telescopic ramp had retracted to its recess in the shell plating, and knew that it would not be long before the main drive of the prison ship seared the rocks that were his comfortless couch with all-consuming fire. But he did not care. To a man such as he the merciful penal laws of his time held little of mercy. Better, he told himself, a quick death than a long lifetime lived out among the incurables of Ceres. He looked at the stars and waited for what, at worst, would be only a micro-second of agony.

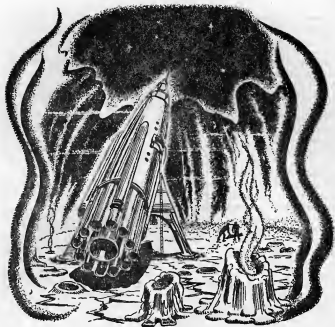
Somebody's clumsy, gloved hands were tugging at the sleeve of his suit. Somebody was trying to pull him to his feet. He did not shift his gaze from the glittering stars but he spoke, his voice strange and tinny in his own helmet phones.

"Get away from here," he said. Then, more urgently, "Get away from here, you fool! Don't you know that the ship will be blasting off at any moment?"

The other made no reply, but the insistent tugging continued. Actuated by rage rather than by any urge towards self-preservation Latimer started to scramble to his feet. Even to himself his motives were not clear—but his hands in their thick gloves tingled with anticipation of the stinging blows that would send this meddler scurrying back to the safety of the airlock under the brow of the low cliff.

THEN the stranger spoke. It was a low voice, softly husky, well modulated—and even the inevitable distortions of the helmet phones could not disguise its magical qualities. Neither could they conceal the undertones compounded of despair, and misery, and resignation.

"Perhaps you are right," Latimer heard. "Perhaps you are wise. Perhaps



your action—our action—will encourage others to follow suit when *Charon* comes again. And then this little world will be the poorer by so many little, personal hells. And that will be good."

The low voice held within itself a honeyed sweetness that had long been lacking from the world of Alan Latimer. Not that his world had been in any way drab or dreary. It had been a good world—harsh, perhaps, but not lacking the bright colour of new faces, fresh scenes, the explosive flares of excitement and danger.

In his world as it had been it is possible that such a voice, unconsciously intimate, full of unspoken promises, would have failed to stir him. But within the narrow compass of this new world, this world that he had made for himself, or that the peculiar, not to be duplicated combination of genes that came from his parents, and from their parents, had made for him, the voice promised a light, a colour, that must be sadly lacking from the days to come. Or it could have been that it brought back memories of a still older world, a plane of existence in which there were other realities than the harsh, turbulent life of the frontiers, the flare of rocket drive against the stars, and the stars themselves, sharp, crystalline, with no kindly atmospheric veil between their hard brilliance and his eyes.

"No!" he heard himself shouting. "We're alive—and we stay that way! Come on!"

AND ALL DISASTROUS THINGS

He was on his feet now. He roughly disengaged himself from the clumsy paw that was still clutching the right sleeve of his armour, put out his own gloved hands to grasp the shoulders of the girl. He did not stop to examine the face that he could dimly see within the transparent bubble of the helmet. He swung her so that she was facing away from him and then, clumsy in his haste, rushed her towards the safety of the low cliff and the airlock. He hoped desperately that the officers of *Charon* would be looking down from Control, that they would see that the field was not yet clear for blasting off.

THEY were still a score of yards from shelter when *Charon's* pilot depressed his firing key. Had Ceres possessed an external atmosphere the roar of the blast might well have deafened them for life. As it was their senses registered a blinding, intolerable light that seemed to strike clean through their skulls to the retina. The ground beneath them shook, and the wave of incandescent gases that was volatilised rock lifted them and cast them from it. In spite of the insulation of their suits they felt the scorching fury of the blast. Had it not been for the insulation they would have been burned to a crisp. And the force with which they were flung to the ground stunned them.

Alan Latimer was first to recover. He staggered to his feet, putting one hand out to the cliff face for support. Blood tasted salt in his mouth and there was a warm trickle from his nostrils. He disregarded it—attired as he was there was nothing else that he could do—and blinked to clear his befogged eyes. He looked up, saw *Charon*, a fast-waning star among the stars.

For a while he watched her, his heart going out with her, revisiting in memory all the ports and cities that he would never again see. It was not until the girl stirred, striking feebly with her arm against his booted foot, that he bethought himself of her and her safety. He stooped, then, awkward in the stiff articulations of his armour, and picked her up. He strode the few short paces to the airlock, dull silver against the rugged black of the cliff. With little of evident tenderness he lowered her to the rocks, fumbled for the controls to the right of the entrance. When the outer door opened he dragged the girl into the little compartment. Already he was beginning to resent the fact that, wittingly or unwittingly, she had balked his plans for a swift, clean suicide.

Pressures equalised, the inner door opened, and he passed through into the ante-chamber beyond. Dimly, he heard the rattle of armour as he let the girl fall from a semi-sitting posture to one that was lifelessly supine. He snapped open the visor of his helmet, took his first breath of the air of the prison world of Ceres.

"SO YOU made it after all," remarked the little man behind the big desk, disinterestedly. "You wouldn't 'a' been the first. There's many a poor sap gone out that way—an' thought that he was bein' hellish clever."

"So you knew?" demanded Latimer.

Big, menacing, he regarded the grey, clerkish keeper of the gate. He was ready to resent the fact that these people had known of his attempted suicide, had made no effort to prevent it. Then he remembered that it had been an inhabitant of Ceres who had pulled him back into the world of the living—and that she had received scant thanks for so doing. The dangerous flare died in his pale eyes, the hard lines of his deeply tanned face softened. With

clumsy haste he dropped to his knees, flung open the visor of his rescuer's helmet.

"And *she* knew, too," chuckled the little clerk. "If I hadn't let her see the advance copy of *Charon's* passenger list she'd never 'a' gone outside. But as soon as all the passengers was tallied in but one—an' that one Lieutenant Alan Latimer—nothin' nor nobody could stop her . . ."

All this Latimer half heard as he stripped the clumsy armour from the body of the girl. The clerk rattled on—then almost fell over backwards in panic as Latimer rose to his feet, reached out with one big hand. But it was only the gaudy silk handkerchief protruding from the little man's pocket that he was wanting. And when he had had it he returned at once to the unconscious girl, began wiping away the trickle of blood that was still oozing from the corner of her mouth, that had gushed in a stream from her nostrils.

"Fetch some cold water!" he barked.

The other hastened to comply. His grumbling monotone as he did so was faintly audible, irritating.

"Don't know why she bothered. Don't know why he's bothering. We're free on Ceres. If folks want to die—we let 'em . . ."

"You! What's your name?"

"Marcus." Then, reluctantly, "Sir."

"And what are *you* here for?"

The little clerk's voice was sullen.

"Forgery. Embezzlement."

"And you know what *I'm* here for. So—keep quiet unless you're spoken to."

And in the silence that followed Latimer completed his superficial examination of the girl. He worked deftly, mechanically, assured himself that no bones were broken—and all the time the conscious part of his mind was bitterly regretting that he had not held her there with him to die in the blast of *Charon's* jets. The voice had stirred faint chords in his memory—but he had assured himself that it was imagination. Now that he could see the woman herself shocked disbelief had rapidly given place to shocked credulity. The figure, true, was fuller, with more than a hint of blowsiness. But the cruellest change had been that in the face. Nobody could deny that Lauranne Towers was still beautiful. But the mouth that had always been a little too large, too full lipped, was now frankly sensual. The fresh charm that he had known so long ago in Port Gregory was now the dangerous allure of the unashamed wanton.

LATIMER dipped the handkerchief afresh into the cold water that Marcus had brought. Again he bathed the pallid face of the woman. She moaned and stirred. Slowly the heavy lidded eyes opened, stared darkly at the anxious face of the ex-lieutenant.

"Alan. I couldn't believe it when I saw your name on the passenger list. I couldn't believe it—until I saw you sprawled on the rocks, waiting for *Charon* to blast off . . ."

"I'm afraid it's true, Laurie . . ."

"My dear. I don't know whether to be glad or sorry. It would have been nice to have died with you out there . . . It can still mean something to us if we live together . . ."

AND ALL DISASTROUS THINGS

"We can go outside and open the visors of our helmets," whispered Latimer bitterly. "It would be best that way. Otherwise—for you, a murderer. For me . . ."

"Alan! Don't!"

"We can go outside. Where we have been, you and I, since those days in Port Gregory the devil alone knows. But we can share the journey's end . . ."

"I'm not stopping you!" cackled Marcus. "You're free, Lieutenant. You're on Ceres. The only laws are the laws you make yourself!"

"And here's one that I'm making now. And that is—get out of our sight at once!"

"You can't . . ."

"I've killed two men—one with my bare hands. Better men than you. So . . ."

And when Marcus had gone Lauranne rose unsteadily to her feet. She sat in the chair behind the desk that the little forger had vacated. From a pocket in her dress she produced a mirror and a compact, and with a hand that hardly trembled began to repair the ravages wrought upon her complexion by the events of the past half hour. When she had finished she opened the top drawer of the desk, brought out a bottle, two glasses, a box of cigarettes.

Latimer was grateful for the smoke, for the stiff slug of good whisky. But, sitting on the desk, he did not like what he saw as he looked down at Lauranne. He did not like the way in which she tossed down her drink, refilled her glass immediately. He looked down—and the look on his harsh face could not be mistaken for anything else but disapproval.

"Cheer up, Alan darling. We're here—both of us. For life. So—better make the best of it."

"Yes. And we'll start like this."

He reached down, snatched the glass from the girl's hand, hurled it and its contents against the further wall. It did not break but fell down the metal surface with almost ludicrous slowness. The trickle of whisky reached the floor only a second after what had been its container. And the sombre, chastened mood that had been driven away from the girl by the warmth of the spirits returned. She got up slowly from the chair, the utmost dejection in every drooping line of her figure. With slow, dragging steps she walked towards the airlock door.

"Where are you going?"

"What does it matter? Outside."

LATIMER waited until her hand went out to the controls of the inner door, then jumped down from his seat. Two long strides—almost leaps in the feeble gravitational field of Ceres—carried him to Lauranne. As before his hands went out to grasp her shoulders—but this time it was to turn her to him. And the pale, blond head of the man went down to that of the woman, was enveloped in the black mist of her hair. For long seconds they stood thus and then, gently, Latimer led Lauranne back to the desk, seated her in the chair behind the massive piece of furniture. He himself remained standing.

"You were right the first time," he admitted at last. "We must live, I don't know why—but in each other we have something . . ."

"Something," whispered the girl, raising her tear-stained face. "Something. A pale shadow of our former lives. Don't lie to me Alan—for you I can never replace the surge of an accelerating ship, the flare of rocket drive against the stars, the ordered routine of your little world of grey paint and burnished metal. For you, more than for me, this is the end of the trip. This is that last haven of which Swinburne sang:

*"There go the loves that wither,
The old loves with wearier wings;
And all dead years draw thither,
And all disastrous things;
Dead dreams of days forsaken,
Blind buds that snows have shaken,
Wild leaves that winds have taken,
Red strays of ruined springs . . ."*

Latimer pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette. Thoughtfully he watched the smoke, watched it as though its spirals and convolutions held the secret of the Universe. The girl looked up at him, her face yearning, hurt that she should be ignored.

At last Latimer looked down, his lips beginning to move. But whatever words he would have said must inevitably have been drowned by the trampling of heavy booted feet along the corridor outside. His hand was a rapid blur as it flashed towards the holster that no longer hung at his side. Then, moving fast, he bundled Lauranne off the chair behind the desk, picked it up so that it could, if need be, be used as a weapon.

The door crashed open.

II

"SO YOU make your own laws," said Kimball.

He leaned well back in the chair that was almost a throne, picked his teeth thoughtfully with a wooden toothpick from the little vase on the table by his right hand. Latimer, watching him intently, was repelled by the man's grossness, his untidy, slovenly attire—but was impressed by the aura of very real power that surrounded the Boss of Ceres.

Kimball spat, the little chewed fragments of wood falling in a fine spray around the cuspidor at his feet.

"So our little friend Marcus told you that we were all anarchists," he sneered.

"I never said so." Latimer's voice was firm, uncompromising.

"I know you didn't. But I know Marcus. They allow me to have a few little machines to play with, Latimer—I've got a lie detector. But I never trouble to use it on people like you. I know your type—you won't talk until you feel like it. And then you'll tell the truth. Maybe not the whole truth—but, nevertheless, nothing but the truth. And I can use men like you. I can trust men like you."

"Thank you. And the alternative?"

"Nothing too bad. You become an ordinary citizen of Ceres. Which means that you have a sufficiency of fresh air and food and artificial sunlight. Which means that you will be allowed to potter around with any of the footling arts and crafts that are encouraged here. Which means that you're liable to be beaten up at any time that my police see fit."

AND ALL DISASTROUS THINGS

The room, with its luxurious appointments, blurred before Latimer's eyes. Fists clenched, he started forward. On either side of him a guard clutched his arm, another struck him across the mouth with a hard hand. Faint and far away he heard the voice of Lauranne. "Don't," she was saying. "Don't be a fool, Alan!"

And the words served only to stir him to fury. His right arm lifted, lifting with it the man who was clinging to it. It swung across his body in a swift arc and the guard at his left hand was felled by the club that the other's body had become. The guard who had struck him went down, the lower half of his face bloody and curiously blurred. It was not until later that Latimer felt the pain in his broken knuckles.

But there were too many of the guards. They fell upon him from all corners of the room, they bore him down with the weight of their bodies. And there was the sharp clicking of steel on steel, and the kiss of cold metallic bands on Latimer's feet and ankles, and when they pulled him to his feet he tottered there, unable to move.

There followed seconds of useless straining at the handcuffs, the leg-irons. Then the bloody haze before Latimer's eyes slowly faded, and through the thinning mists he saw the flabby, paradoxically strong face of the Boss. Kimball had one fat band upraised in a demand for silence.

"Hear me out," he was saying almost plaintively. "You, of all persons, must know the need for discipline. If what I hear of you is true your crimes were no more than strict enforcement of discipline. And yet you seek to hamper my poor efforts to bring law and order to this lawless little world."

"THINK well, Latimer. What would Ceres be were it not for some organised body to enforce certain standards of law and decency? Perhaps my rule is not democratic—but, I ask you, have we the raw materials of democracy here? I will be frank with you—back on Earth I wanted too much power, and I wasn't over particular in the methods I used to get it. I was apprehended once, psychoed and warned. But they couldn't change me. I was apprehended a second time—one of my underlings was both jealous and ambitious. And this time I was classified as an Incurable.

"And here, on Ceres, I still want power. And still I'm not particular about the methods I use to get it."

"So I see."

"Now you are being foolish. What would have happened to you if you had been brought before one of your Admirals and attempted to assault him? And they rule only squadrons of ships. I rule a world."

Latimer forbore to make unkind comparisons between the size and the striking power of those same squadrons and that of Kimball's domain. He only said shortly:

"All right, I'll play ball. What's in it for me if I come in with you?"

"Membership of my police force—with prospects of promotion. The right to first choice of the comforts and luxuries brought by *Charon*. The right to marry whom you please."

"Marry?"

When Latimer heard Lauranne's little gasp—more of hurt than indignation—he was sorry that he had not been able to keep the amused incredulity out of his voice. But Kimball, his tone unchanged, continued.

"Yes, marry. We are a very moral people, Latimer. There are those, of course, who are not moral—and unless they offend against public decency no action is taken against them. But as one of the governing class you will be expected to respect the laws that you, yourself, will enforce."

"Law and order," said Latimer musingly. "Here, on Ceres. Take off these damned irons, Kimball, and I'll sign your articles or whatever you call them."

Kimball signed to the guards, one of whom produced a key.

"And, in future, call me 'Boss'," he warned. "And you, Constable Merrick, rustle up a copy of the contract so that Constable Latimer can sign. While you're about it bring along a marriage licence. We'll tie this fellow up in more ways than one!"

THERE was something wrong with the park. It was not the grass, neither was it the gorgeous flowers; their equal would have been hard to find anywhere on any of the inhabited worlds. It was not the cavern roof that arched far overhead—that was lost in a dim blue haze from which streamed the health-giving rays of the big sun lamps. It could almost have been the sky of Earth in a misty mood.

Constable Alan Latimer stared about him, barely conscious of the light pressure on his arm that was Lauranne Latimer's hand. But she, ever-conscious of him, read his thoughts.

"No children," she said. "That is what is wrong."

And the man looked about him at the wide expanse of green lawn, at the sedately strolling couples—young, middle-aged, old—and saw that she was right. It was all too orderly, unnaturally quiet. He realised with a sudden pang that, in all probability, the only happy man was the bent, grey gardener who was working with slow and loving patience in a bright flower-bed nearby.

Gently he disengaged his arm from his wife's light grasp, raised it so that it fitted about her waist. They strolled on, enjoying the feel of the smooth, velvety grass under their bare feet, listening to the songs of the birds that were such a poor substitute for the joyous clamour of children at play.

"That has always seemed to me to be cruellest of all," he mused. "The sterilisation law."

"But it's kind, my dear. You couldn't bring up children in a penal colony. Whether or not their heredity was unsound they, themselves, would grow up to be criminal types. And if they were taken from us at an early age and sent to Earth for their upbringing—that would be crueller still. For us."

"Perhaps you are right. But I know Ceres better now. And it wouldn't be a bad world in which to rear children. No worse than many another."

"As it is now. But we are fortunate in our Boss. Broderick, before him, called himself King. And he was mad and bad. Then there was a long period of anarchy—which was worse than ever the rule of King Broderick had been. Kimball wants power and is quite ruthless—but he uses his power well. The man who follows him—who can tell? He may be strong and bad; he may be weak and good—which will be worse."

The two walked on in silence.

"You know," admitted Latimer, "this is not bad. This world, I mean. I have you. I was a fool, my dear, ever to lose touch with you after I sailed from Port Gregory. But I was young then—and the Service was wife and

parents, and children. But I am glad that I have found you again. If only it could have been some other way . . ."

"What did happen? I've respected the privacy of your past, Alan, just as you've respected mine. But . . . A woman is always curious, I guess."

"IT WILL do no harm to tell you. The first time was when I was second in command of *Pathfinder*. We were on a survey job, measuring, charting, along with a spot of geology, in the Belt. It was the other side of the Sun from Ceres. Well, the charts we had weren't too accurate—and one day we found ourselves in one of those jams that it would be almost impossible for the finest mathematician in the world to duplicate on paper. We were on a collision orbit with no less than half a dozen hunks of assorted cosmic debris, and there was no way out. The automatic controls just blew all their fuses and died.

"Some didn't get into their suits in time, we never had a chance to get a message away, and in the finish there were five survivors in our number two boat with myself in charge.

"The way things were the best policy was to put ourselves on the Earth-Jupiter lane and wait until *Thunderqueen* came along. It was a long wait—and long before she was due, long before we could raise her on our lifeboat transmitter, tempers were wearing very thin. And we were hungry all the time—have you ever tried to make a meal of food concentrates? The nourishment is there, the protein and the calories and the vitamins. But there's no bulk. You're always hungry. And the boat was cramped, and we were all in each other's way, and we hated each other.

"And then, during my sleep period, one of the technical ratings, a fellow named Burton, tried to raid the food locker. I woke up, and we fought. I fought a little harder than was necessary—but once I got my fingers round his throat I couldn't let go."

"But that was only the first."

"Yes—that was only the first. I was warned, and psychoed, and discharged as fit for duty. And so I was—until a bar-room brawl in Port Lasalle. You know how I always used to boast about my skill with side-arms, about being quick on the draw. There was this fellow in the bar, Town Marshal, I think he was. I don't know what he was like sober—but he was most unpleasant drunk. Perhaps I am, too. Anyhow, he pulled a gun on me. And before he had it clear of his holster I'd drilled him between the eyes.

"And that was the finish for me."

Lauranne said nothing. Latimer did not look at her face, but he felt the warm waves of sympathy that radiated from her. Only one who, like himself, had come to this sink hole of the Solar System, could possibly sympathise.

They came to the grass verge. Automatically they stooped, put on the sandals that they had been carrying. They walked on over the smooth surfaced floor of the tunnel. It did not matter to them that the artificial sunlight of the park had been replaced by lights that made no pretence of being other than utilitarian lighting fixtures. There was a warmth between them, and a dim but steady radiance that needed no assistance from outside power supplies.

Yet, as he walked, Latimer took almost unconscious note of his surroundings. He was in a part of Ceres strange to him. The tunnel walls were

devoid of the usual doorways and windows of residential apartments. The floor was coated with a fine dust. There were the tracks of one of the little scooters to show that somebody had come this way, and recently, but that was the only sign of traffic there was.

STILL they walked on, half in a dream, welded to each other by the seal of confession. The voice of the sentry, harsh, commanding, came as a sudden shock.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Friend," replied Latimer automatically.

He looked up to see one of Kimball's police, smart in his uniform of blue and silver. The metal-shod stove was held, threateningly, at the ready.

"Advance, friend," began the constable, "and . . ."

His eyes dropped to the little silver badge on the left breast of Latimer's civilian shirt, lifted to study his face. And there was a light of recognition, of the memory of past intimacies, in his eyes as he shifted his regard to the girl.

"All right," he said. "You're the new man, aren't you? Latham or Latimer or something. I suppose that Lauranne is showing you the sights."

The cold, hard flame leapt into vicious life behind Latimer's pale eyes. He was often to wonder later what he would have done, what would have been the consequences of his actions, had not his wife taken charge. He felt her grip on his arm, painfully tight, and he heard her say: "Alan, this is Philip Lane, an old friend of mine. Philip, this is Alan Latimer, my husband."

His hand went out—but only to grip that of the other. Lane was talking quickly, nervously, fully conscious that the air was charged with hostility.

"Haven't they shown you round here yet? You'll be getting your spell of guard duty soon enough . . ."

He led them down the tunnel, around a bend. And the tunnel was sealed with a bulkhead of gleaming steel. In this was set a door, like that of some huge safe or treasure vault. The levers and wheels and dials on its shining face would not have looked out of place on the control panel of a Jovian Mail Liner.

"And what's behind all that?" demanded Latimer, his anger giving place to curiosity.

"That's what we'd all like to know. But *we* never see behind that door. Nobody does—not even the Boss. But every year *Charon* brings a flock of technicians from Earth, and they're escorted here by a regiment of armed guards from the ship, and they potter around with the machinery and we know that we're all right for another year.

"There's light in there, Latimer, and heat, and the power that drives the pumps. There's *Power* in there—and every Boss that we've ever had in Ceres would have sold his soul to lay his grubby paws on it. We have men here—cracksmen—who could have this door, and the other doors, open in less time than it'd take you or me to open a can of sardines . . ."

"Then why don't they?"

"Because there's always at least one of us here to stop 'em. Because if they did we'd all find out if it's true what the technicians tell us. Because if they did folks back on Earth and Mars would see a first-class nova right in their back gardens."

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"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean that if anybody tries to get through those doors, or tries to get through to the vault in any other way, up goes the atomic power station that's tucked away in there."

"Oh," replied Latimer inadequately. Then—"Thanks, Lane." He looked at his watch. "Time we were getting back now. I have to be on duty at 20.00."

"A policeman's lot is not a happy one," riposted the other. "But it could be unhappier. Eh, Lauranne?"

"I wouldn't know," she replied frozenly. "Come, Alan."

She felt that the muscles of his arm, beneath the thin shirt, were tensed. But now she felt that she was barely able to control the monster that had been called from the dark abyss of her husband's ancestry in *Pathfinder's* lifeboat; that, once called into being, had destroyed his career.

"Come, Alan," she said again.

And when they were around the bend of the tunnel he turned to her and asked: "What is he to you?"

"He is nothing. And—he *was* nothing. Will you be content with that?"

"Yes," he replied at last, slowly, grudgingly. "I suppose so."

III

INSPECTOR Alan Latimer cursed as the telephone, shrill, insistent, interrupted his leisurely breakfast.

It was Lauranne who answered it. She was gone a long time. When she returned Latimer looked at her with more than a faint distaste, reflecting that women such as she should never slop around in dressing gowns.

"It's for you," she said.

"Oh. Who is it?"

"The Boss."

"*You* were a long time talking to him."

"Was I? Anyhow, it's important."

Latimer gulped a mouthful of egg, washed it down with coffee, rose slowly to his feet.

"In future," he growled, "when calls come for me—or calls that you *say* are for me—don't hang around in the booth all morning answering them."

"Aren't you going? It was *important*, I said."

"To you and who else?"

Nevertheless, Latimer went through to the telephone booth, sat down on the little seat before the instrument. From the screen Kimball's flabby, pasty face glowered at him.

"So you're here at last, Latimer. I thought you were never coming."

"The message took long enough to reach me."

"I don't care for your tone of voice, Latimer—but let that pass. Come round to my office at once."

"Why?"

"I don't have to answer questions. Button up your jacket and wipe the egg off your face—and *hurry*. That's all."

The instrument went dead. Latimer considered calling the Boss back, thought better of it. But the taste of the morning was bitter in his mouth as he went back into the breakfast room to finish his coffee. He drained the

cup, put it back into the saucer with an unnecessary clatter. He went into the little hall of the apartment. He took his cap from its peg, clapped it anyhow on to his head without troubling to look into the mirror. He did not kiss Lauranne goodbye.

IN Kimball's office he found the Boss nervously pacing up and down. Seated were two men, strangers. They were in uniform. Latimer stared. *Charon* was not due for two months yet. He looked more closely. The visitors wore the insignia of the Jovian Mail Service—a five-pointed star transfixed by a jagged, conventional lightning bolt.

"Latimer," said Kimball abruptly, pausing in his restless pacing, the inevitable toothpick working with a speed that betrayed the depth of his agitation, "these gentlemen are Captain Pemberthy and Commander Wood of *Thunderqueen*."

"*Thunderqueen*, Boss? But . . ."

"*Thunderqueen* I said—and *Thunderqueen* I mean. Captain, this is Inspector Latimer of my police force, ex-Lieutenant Latimer of the regular navy . . ."

Latimer put out his hand. It was ignored by Pemberthy. The Inspector flushed deeply and darkly under his tan, and the cold light flared briefly in his pale eyes. He looked fixedly at the short, stout Captain whose hatless head gleamed in the lamplight, at the tall, angular Commander. And then anger was replaced by puzzlement. Long and steadily he looked at Commander Wood—and did not find that for which he was seeking.

"We had to make a forced landing on your world," began Pemberthy without preamble. "Our tube linings are burnt out, and we don't carry spares. Our hull is strained and leaking badly. We shall have to stay here until help comes . . ."

"So what?"

"We're being followed. Chased, rather. By a big, black ship that seemed to come from the direction of Polaris—although that means nothing. And she was no earthly ship. We approached her close when our radar picked her up—thought at first that she was some hitherto undiscovered planetoid with an orbit at right angles to the plane of the ecliptic. We were almost on top of her before we saw what she was. And as we were turning away she let fly with some ray that burned away most of our starboard fins and the venturis of the starboard auxiliaries. We ran, of course. She didn't take any more hostile action that we could see although, for all we know, she may have used her ray again and missed. One thing she did do—blanketed our radio so that we could neither transmit nor receive . . ."

"Kimball!" broke in Latimer, "I suggest that you let these officers use our station."

"A blinding glimpse of the obvious!" snarled the Boss. "That was the first thing they asked of me. Carter went along with them. And the blanketing effect of theirs obviously covers us."

"So. Now, Captain, how do you know that you're being followed?"

"I don't know." Pemberthy's voice was peculiarly flat, almost lifeless. "I don't *know*. But it seems reasonable to suppose that any race sufficiently advanced for interstellar travel will be at least as far advanced as ourselves in the field of electronics. They'll have had their scanners on us ever since the first contact. The mere fact that the radio is dead here indicates that."

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"And I'm still to be convinced that this marvellous big, black ship is from outside!" stormed the Boss. "It could be pirates. And if it is, and if they come here, I'm making a deal. Ceres owes no loyalty to the Federation."

"How did you know it was an alien ship, anyhow?"

THE little, fat Captain hesitated before making his reply. It was impossible to read his expression—there was no expression to read. His face was that of a carved Buddha.

"It was her shape," said Pemberthy at last. "And her hull wasn't smooth, but covered with all kinds of projections. Weapons they might have been, or adjuncts of her interstellar drive. And she had her name in big white letters on her bow. And they belonged to no Earthly alphabet . . ."

"Could have been Arabic or Chinese. Anyhow, a ship capable of coming here from Alpha Centauri or Sirius or wherever she's supposed to have come from could have made rings round your decrepit old wagon."

"No. She would not be using her interstellar drive in the vicinity of a planetary system. And it is reasonable to suppose that, even using her reaction motors, she would approach such a system with caution . . ."

"And so you brought her here . . ."

"It was the nearest port of refuge," replied Pemberthy simply.

"And do I organise the defence of Ceres?" demanded Latimer sharply.

"Yes. Of course." The Boss seemed mildly surprised that the question had been asked.

"What with?"

Kimball glared at him. He began to say something, then thought better of it. His tone, when at last he did speak, was placatory.

"You're the professional fighting man in this outfit," he said. "I leave that entirely in your hands. And I am sure that these gentlemen will do all that they can to help you."

"First," stated Latimer, "I shall want access to your engine room, Captain Pemberthy. I think that with your tools, your workshops, and with your converter to manufacture explosives, I shall be able to turn out some Hamilton torpedoes. Don't know how much use they'll be against a race that plays around with death rays—but unless they know enough to degauss their ships they should be fairly effective. And I shall want any arms that you, your passengers, or crew have in your possession."

"Any arms we have, we keep," said Pemberthy flatly. "And I regret to have to say that you will not be allowed to set foot aboard my ship."

"Great Galaxy!" exploded the Inspector. "This is no time to be petty. Don't you realise that the fate of this world, of the System, of Man himself, may depend upon your co-operation?"

The Captain was silent. But the tall Commander stirred and spoke. "Regulations," he said simply, and that was all. But it was the cue that Pemberthy needed.

"Yes. Regulations. You know what happened when your people got control of *Thunderbird*. That must not happen again."

It was Kimball who found a way out of the impasse.

"Why," he asked, "shouldn't you give these gentlemen details of whatever it is you want made? Then all that will concern you will be the finished article."

And that was how it was finally arranged. And the Hamilton torpedoes were to remain aboard *Thunderqueen* until such time as the black ship of the aliens chose to appear. And with that Latimer had to be content.

He found it especially humiliating that, with their own little world well-guarded, inviolate, the passengers and crew of the Jovian liner were made free of all Ceres.

But even that had its compensations.

FOR long years, ever since the first primitive story-teller soared on the wings of his imagination to the stars, the invasion from Outside had been an ever-recurrent theme of mankind's fiction. At first the tide of conquest was to come sweeping in from the Moon or the sister planets—but the instruments of the astronomers had shown the improbabilities inherent in such a plot even before the spaceship slipped, with disconcerting ease, from the realm of fancy into that of fact. Thereafter the invaders were to come from the stars. From which particular star nobody was ever quite sure—but surely among all the glittering hosts of heaven there was one with planets to spawn a race to rival or surpass the technological progress of Man.

But the very idea had been a purely fictional concept for so long that the Ceresians, even if they did accept it intellectually, could never do so with their emotions. Perhaps the only man in the little world to whom this raid from interstellar space was probable, possible, was Alan Latimer. But he had taken part in the Navy's war games, those fleet manoeuvres in which half Earth's forces fought, in theory, to the last man and the last gun, in which the other half played the part of Centaurians or Rigellians or whatever the fancy of the Commander-in-Chief might dictate.

As for the rest—the Boss had said that *Thunderqueen* had been attacked by pirates of humble Terran origin. And the Boss, as always, was right. It was true that the Captain and Officers of the liner stuck to their story of an alien ship—but it was obvious that they were lying as a matter of policy. As long as they could convince the Ceresians that they were about to fight a common enemy an alliance was possible. But that enemy had to be alien. Captain Pemberthy knew full well that his hosts would far prefer to throw in their lot with the raiders—if they were human—than with himself. It was all so obvious.

Meanwhile—if Inspector Alan Latimer chose to believe the cock and bull story of his fellow spacemen there was more good than harm done. The plans made for the defence of the little world, the organising, the drilling, were admitted to be necessary. When the pirates came in their black ship any kind of organised resistance would be a most useful bargaining counter. So would the weapons that were being made aboard *Thunderqueen* to Latimer's specifications.

AND THE strangers who roamed without let or hindrance through the caves and tunnels made a very welcome break in the monotony of life in the prison asteroid. They were not molested—there would be time enough for that when the pirates came. Besides, in spite of Pemberthy's refusal to surrender his arms to Latimer, it was quite obvious that he had enough and to spare of weapons for his own people. They did not wear them ostentatiously, but neither did they go to any great pains to conceal them. And

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one of the parks had been set aside for their use as a shooting range. Both men and women showed a proficiency that was an effective deterrent to any of the Incurables who might have ideas.

An ex-officer himself, Latimer could not blame the Captain. If he had been Master of a passenger liner he would not have allowed his charges to wander unprotected about a penal colony. But he would not have allowed shore leave. But perhaps the hull *was* leaking badly (if so, why not make some attempt to patch it?) and, quite probably, the first that would be known of the approach of the alien ship would be the sudden destruction of *Thunderqueen*.

The police force had all been warned to be on the alert for the first signs of internal trouble. But Ceres could well have been some fashionable pleasure resort. Well-dressed men and women strolled the parkways, mingled without snobbery or embarrassment with the colonists. The theatres played always to full houses. Even allowing for the excellence of the talent this was mildly surprising—until one remembered that, with the mysterious blanket still thick over all radio transmission and reception, no Terran entertainment was available.

And as the purely arbitrary days rolled on without the merest hint of *Thunderqueen's* black ship there were those who wished heartily that the raiders or pirates would come or—even better—that the Jovian liner and all her people would go. The officers and passengers of the big ship were becoming altogether too ubiquitous. There is little enough privacy, at the best of times, on a world such as Ceres. And the four hundred odd people who were *Thunderqueen's* personnel seemed, to a certain growing minority, to have the nuisance value of four times their number.

ALAN LATIMER was not of this minority. To him the days were packed with interest, and with the sense of urgency, of working against time. And Lauranne saw little of him in the brief periods he allowed himself for relaxation. She heard stories—stories that at first met with incredulity, that at last forced a grudging belief upon her. Always these stories featured the name of Ailsa Rae. Lauranne remembered having seen the girl. Slight she was, and red-headed, with high cheekbones and eyes that were green. And she moved with a lithe grace that Lauranne herself could never hope to recapture. And while she knew in her heart that Alan was hers yet she knew, with a dreadful certainty, that the coming battle with the aliens meant for her husband the slim chance of pardon, of a new life that she was not intended to share.

These thoughts had crossed Latimer's mind. In his more optimistic moments he had allowed himself to dream dreams. And he had hated himself that his wife was not part of these same dreams—but the dreams remained unchanged. But in these latter days the thought whose urgency crowded all else from his mind was that he was not ready. A whim of fate had made him Earth's champion in the first battle between men and aliens—and both armour and armament were sadly lacking. He decided that he would force a showdown between himself and Pemberthy, would demand to be allowed to inspect the progress made in the manufacture of the torpedoes, the arming of *Thunderqueen*.

He said as much to Ailsa Rae, with whom he was walking in one of the parks.

"But it is all right, Alan," she insisted. "I've been down to the engine-room and the workshops. I know nothing about these things—but I saw row upon row of plastic cylinders, each with its fins and jets at the tail. And they're setting up launching cradles in all the airlocks. It will be all right, I tell you."

"Perhaps, my dear. But I want to see for myself. And I want to have at least one round for each of my own projectors. If this black ship of Pemberthy's drops on us without warning and blasts *Thunderqueen*—I have no weapons to fight back."

"But . . . Oh, I can see it's no use arguing with you. You'll see the Old Man, and you'll have a first-class row, same as you did before, and you'll get nowhere. And . . ."

"Shut up!" ordered Latimer. He enforced his order by pressing his mouth on hers. And as she went limp in his arms he felt his resolve to have it out with Captain Pemberthy weaken. He was doing enough. He was doing more than his share. Let the Boss dicker with *Thunderqueen's* Master—he was the politician.

HOW long this mood would have lasted had it not been for the intervention of chance it is impossible to say. But it was the hard pressure of Ailsa's shoulder holster against his chest that aroused resentment, pulled him up from the pit into which he was fast falling. This girl, this woman that was his for the taking, was armed—and he was not. It was an affront to his pride as a fighting man. It was unthinkable that a foolish merchant skipper should have the effrontery to provide his female passengers with weapons, and deny those same weapons to those to whom was entrusted the defence of a world, and more than a world.

He let his arms fall to his sides. The girl, taken unawares, staggered. And in her green eyes when she looked up at him was puzzlement and hurt, and a strange light that was neither.

"Where do I find the Captain?" demanded Latimer harshly.

"You should know," she replied sullenly. "He and Commander Wood are usually with your Boss at this time."

"Then I'm going there now. And Kimball had better back me up. Or . . ."

"Or what?" The voice was mocking.

"Never you mind," he laughed, matching her mood of light railery. He clasped her to him and kissed her heartily. And thought that if this had been Lauranne the little scene would have been followed by an atmosphere of dull resentment that would have lasted for hours.

IV

SOMEHOW, as he strode across the velvety grass, his spirits were light. He looked with appreciation at a tall, blonde girl, one of the liner's passengers. And he was not too surprised when he saw, a few minutes later, the same girl again. It couldn't possibly be the same girl, he told himself. She must be twins . . . And thought nothing more of it.

He returned the salute of the sentry at the entrance to Kimball's apartments with a snap that surprised even himself. As he strode along the corridor he found that he was rehearsing what he would say to Pemberthy.

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He repeated the most telling phrases, turning them over and over in his mind with relish.

It was not until he had almost reached the office that the sound of angry voices aroused him from his pleasant daydream. Angry voices? He listened intently. There was only one angry voice, and that was Kimball's. Pemberthy was speaking in his usual expressionless tones. And Wood appeared not to be speaking at all.

Latimer started to hurry. As he reached the door he heard Kimball shout: "I know! I know what . . ." And there was a peculiarly soft explosion, and a scream, and—when Latimer flung open the door—the sickening stench of burned flesh.

On the floor, in front of his desk, lay Kimball. Where his protuberant belly had been was a charred, gaping hole. The coils of the intestines, laid bare, seemed to have a life of their own, were writhing slowly and slimily. Latimer gulped. He turned away quickly. But not before he had seen the smoking gun in Wood's hand, the ugly weapon that Pemberthy was pointing straight at him.

When he looked back both Wood and Pemberthy were covering him with their weapons. They were, he saw, standard .5 Service automatics, fitted with silencers, firing an explosive slug. And the hands that held them wavered not one fraction of a second of arc.

Latimer was not unarmed. He had his stout, metal-tipped stave, and the short dirk at his belt. Against two nervous, inexperienced gunmen he would have stood a fighting chance. But these gunmen were not nervous. Such *sang froid* might have been expected from two officers of his own late service—but hardly from those whose whole training emphasised the safe delivery of passengers and cargo, the safety of their ships. He, Latimer, had killed his men in hot blood. The only hot blood in evidence in this killing had been Kimball's. The two merchant officers were no more than cold-blooded murderers.

Pemberthy was speaking.

"I am sorry that this had to happen," he said.

"You will be when you're sent out here to become a permanent guest," cracked Latimer.

"Let me finish. Your Boss, Kimball, was planning to seize our ship, to hand her over to the invaders that he will—would—insist on regarding as Terran pirates. We quarrelled. He drew a knife. Commander Wood was obliged to fire in self-defence."

"What did Kimball *know*?" demanded the Inspector.

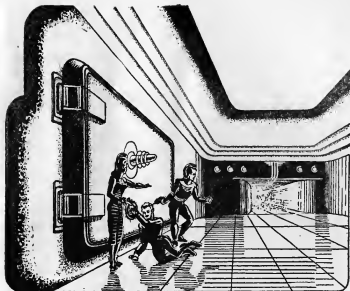
There was a little silence. Then Wood permitted himself the luxury of a mirthless smile.

"He thought that he knew that the ship that attacked us was manned by Terran pirates . . ."

"Another thing—you've said that you could not spare us arms. But even your women are packing guns."

"We should, perhaps, have been more frank. Put yourself in our place, Latimer. As far as we are concerned this place may be more dangerous than the jungles of Venus. Are we to deprive ourselves and our charges of all protection?"

"No," admitted Latimer slowly. "But the alliance between us—if you



can call it such—has been far too one-sided. You and your people have been given the freedom of our world. And what have we got in return? Nothing but vague promises.

"Worse—you are supposed to be the law-abiding citizens, we the criminals. Yet . . ." He pointed mutely to Kimball's body.

PEMBERTHY was silent. It was not, strangely enough, an embarrassed or a guilty silence. This the Inspector found strange indeed. He was willing to believe that the master of a passenger liner might well find a lack of frankness, a certain disingenuousness, very essential in the execution of his professional duties; might even, in time, become an accomplished prevaricator. But it is not so much the act of lying, of equivocation, that brings moral discomfort in its wake. It is being found out. But this was as nothing to the fact that Kimball's killers, men of peace, could view the body of the man they had butchered without the slightest trace of emotion.

"Let him see the ship," suggested Wood, his voice expressionless as always. "Let him see the ship, and convince himself that we *are* making his weapons. But first, sir, it will be as well to dispose of the body."

"Commander Wood is right," agreed the Captain. "Nobody need know that Kimball is dead. At a time of crisis such as this it will be as well if nobody ever does know that Kimball is dead. You, of course, will carry on as you have been doing—ever since our arrival you have been the real boss. Kimball has been only a figurehead."

Latimer wanted to argue. He wanted to press the stud under the desk

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that would bring the guards pouring into the room. And, above all, he wanted to do violence to the two who stood there and to whom the body on the floor was just so much refuse to be unceremoniously dumped.

But . . . They held the guns.

Had it not been for the fact that there was nobody else on Ceres to whom the military command could be entrusted, that he, Alan Latimer, was, even though Earth did not know, might never know, entrusted with the defence of the Solar System, he would never have let himself be overawed by the threat of the heavy pistols, would have allowed the tides of fury to sweep aside all prudence, all considered action.

But Ceres had wrought its changes. So, too, had the heavy responsibility with which he had been saddled. And he held himself in a tight rein, and the red haze never quite obscured his vision, and the drumming of the blood in his ears was never loud enough to drown what the others were saying.

"Well?" demanded Pemberthy.

"I still think that you're murderers. I still have to be convinced of the truth of your story. But . . ."

"Yes?"

"You give me no choice."

Wood had found the cunningly concealed button in the panelling. He pressed it, and a circular section of the floor slid to one side. Latimer wondered how the strangers knew of the existence of the chute that ran down to the big fertiliser tanks. Probably Kimball had told them in a moment of drunken confidence. He had always been proud of this unconventional office fitting. But during his reign it had never, until now, been used for bodies. Bitterly Latimer reflected on how much better the Boss had been than his bad and mad predecessors, experienced a sense of very real loss, of hatred for his murderers.

WOOD dragged the gross body to the edge of the round hole, gave it a last shove with his foot. It teetered for a second or so, then vanished. From very far away came the sound of a splash. Kimball had always been proud of Ceres' parks and gardens. And in death he would serve them no less faithfully than he had done during his life.

Pemberthy waited until his executive officer had removed, with a piece of rag, all traces of blood from the polished floor, sent the hideously stained cloth to follow the body. Then, with his gun, he gestured towards the door.

"And tell the guards," he said, "that the Boss is working hard, must not be disturbed. You can arrange to have food sent in at intervals."

You fools, thought Latimer. *Whoever brings the food will see at once that there is something amiss . . . But we're playing the game your way. All I have to do is to keep my jets clear.*

The two officers returned their guns to their side pockets. The Inspector could sense rather than see that he was still covered, that the slightest hostile move on his part would be the last move that he would make. They closed in on either side of him as they walked along the corridor to the outside passages. So close were they that he found it difficult to return the salutes of the guards.

At the last door there was another constable talking to the one on duty. When he saw Latimer he stiffened to attention, brought his hand to the

brim of his helmet. The most meticulously Prussian military officer would have found it hard to lay his finger on anything wrong with the salute—but in it there was something of what, in all Services and all ages, has been called "dumb insolence."

The man was Lane.

"Mrs. Latimer's compliments, sir," he said stiffly, "and will you come round to your apartment at once?"

Alan Latimer did not want to go. The memory of the girl Ailsa was too fresh in his mind, dreams of a future in which she played a prominent part were not lacking. But—

"That can wait," said Pemberthy.

"Oh, I don't know . . ."

"Of course it can wait."

And who the hell are you to give me orders affecting my private life? Come to think of it—you and your long, lanky sidekick are ruddy anxious to get me aboard your damned ship. There's a catch in it somewhere. But I don't want to be bumped off the same as Kimball. All the same—I'd better play ball—my way. Up to a point. Can't afford to split brass rags when the alien ship may be upon us at any moment . . .

But he said: "I think I'd better go, Captain." He managed a mirthless grin. "You know what women are."

"I think you'd better come with us," Wood stated flatly. No trace of emotion was evident in his voice, in his eyes, but Latimer knew that the index finger of the Commander's right hand had tightened about the trigger of his gun.

Latimer glanced about him. There were two many witnesses for a murder. In addition to Lane and the constable on duty there were three more police officers just coming out of the administration offices. And there were a half dozen of *Thunderqueen's* passengers, men and women, coming along the wide corridor.

It should have been reassuring—yet he had the feeling that Wood would as soon shoot him down in front of all Ceres as in private.

"No," he said. "My wife wants me, and I'd better go. But that matter we talked over in Kimball's office—you have my word that I'm in favour . . ."

The dull, expressionless eyes stared into his. Then—"We have your word?"

"Haven't I just told you?"

"Good. And as for your visit to the ship—some other time, perhaps."

That's what you think, thought Latimer. He gave the two merchant officers a perfunctory salute, strode down the corridor with steps that he tried to make not too hurried. And the uneasy feeling in the small of his back persisted until he had put a bend of the passage between himself and Pemberthy and Wood.

HE HAD every intention of going straight to his apartment. He was curious as to the reason for Lauranne's summons, and he was grateful to her for having extricated him from what he felt to have been an awkward situation. Awkward? It was more than that. He became aware that his underclothing was clammy with perspiration, knew that he had experienced a fear altogether beyond even the most unpleasant and terrifying events of

his past life. He told himself that this was because it was the first time that he had forced himself to stand up to a real emergency in cold blood. During his Service career a recklessness, an unthinking bravery, had stood him in good stead—until the black day that this same recklessness spelled the ruin of his career and all his hopes. That's what it was, he told himself. But the explanation wasn't convincing.

He was deep in thought as he turned the corner into the corridor on which his apartment was situated. Unseeing, blind and deaf to all else but the problem in his brain, he let his feet carry him around the familiar curve. And when he cannoned into something firm, yet soft, something that said: "Well! Really!" he was taken by surprise and off balance, staggered and almost fell. If Ailsa Rae had not caught his arm he would have fallen.

"Wrapped in thought and clothed in haste," she said mockingly. "And hurrying home like a good husband . . ."

"Why, yes. But not too good, I'm afraid . . ."

The girl fell in step beside him. Latimer was walking more slowly now, matching his pace to hers. He was telling her his troubles, his worries, asking her to use her influence with Pemberthy—if she had any influence—to try to get him the arms that he so sorely needed.

"It's hopeless," he said. "I can't fight lethal rays with quarterstaves and cutlasses and crossbows . . ." He passed his door and did not notice, would not have cared if he had noticed . . . "and that fat little beggar is sitting on top of enough material to turn this world into a fortress . . ."

"I'll see what I can do, my dear. I won't promise anything, but the next time that he has me up to his room for cocktails I'll put your case as strongly as I can. The trouble is—he might be jealous."

"What of?"

"Nothing." She smiled up at him, her eyes greenly luminous under the rusty hair. "Nothing at all, Alan—but whose fault is that?"

"Perhaps mine."

"Yes. Perhaps yours."

"But a man has certain loyalties . . ."

"Why worry about loyalties when time is so short? To-morrow, or the day after, the black ship of the aliens may attack. She may, even now, be attacking . . . And whether we win or whether we lose—it will have been something to have had each other. And you talk of loyalties. What cause has Lauranne given you to be loyal?"

"I wasn't thinking of Lauranne," lied Latimer. "I was thinking of my duty to this world, to the race. I was thinking . . ." He lapsed into silence and thought: *Bloody liar. Of course you were thinking of Lauranne. And yet—Ailsa is so different. And it's no use kidding yourself that you're going to win this forthcoming scrap and get a free pardon and marry the girl. Because you're not. Even with "Thunderqueen's" armoury and workshops thrown open to you you wouldn't stand a snowball's chance in hell. All you can do is fight to the last man and the last gun—if Fatty Pemberthy lets you have the guns in time—and see to it that that mousy little mutant Fenwick does his stuff before you blow the last round away. So why not? But Lauranne . . .*

And there came to him the memory of those lines of poetry that his wife had quoted when he was new on Ceres. Only a short time ago it was, as men measure time, but it seemed that Lauranne's voice was coming to him

over unguessable gulfs.

*"There go the old loves that wither,
The old loves with wearier wings;
And all dead years draw thither,
And all disastrous things . . ."*

The dead years, he thought, and the old love that has withered, and a disastrous thing drawing closer and ever closer from the stars . . . I will do my best, I will fight to the last man and the last gun—but I reserve the right to snatch some few moments of personal happiness from the wreck . . .

V

THEY had come, now, to one of the big park spaces. At this hour it was almost deserted, and the sunlamps in the blue haze of the high roof were dimmed. And across the wide expanse of lawn and beds of flowering plants there were trees. And the azure mist seemed to curl through their branches. In this world of caves and tunnels where there was neither night nor day there was yet the dim mystery of evening. And the knowledge that the twilight had been turned on by some grubby little technician did nothing to detract from its magic.

For the magic was within themselves.

Slowly, arms around each other's waists, they walked across the grass to the trees. And in the privacy afforded by the overhanging branches they found a couch of soft moss. And the girl's face as she lay, relaxed, was a pale glimmer in the dusk, and her eyes were like two of the stars that were all that was lacking from the man-made dusk.

Latimer stood looking down at her. There was power in those eyes, and a depth in which he could easily drown. Now that the moment had come, the opportunity, he was strangely reluctant to press home the attack. It would be nice to be able to say that it was the thought of Lauranne that acted as a deterrent—but it would not be true. What held him back was the realisation that he was not the attacker but the defender, and the dim knowledge that far more was at stake than his unimportant virtue.

Ailsa said: "Why don't you sit down? The moss is soft . . ."

And Lauranne, although far from his thoughts, was not far away in the flesh. The bushes briefly protested at the rapid passage of a body through their interlacing branches, there was the dull gleam of an uplifted blade in the twilight, and there was a spluttering shower of blue sparks as the blade struck home.

Alan Latimer was fast. There was only one thing that saved his wife's life—and that was the strange thing that had happened when she buried her knife in the body of her rival. It didn't make sense. And so Latimer, who by his grip on Lauranne's wrists had prevented a second blow, did not turn the knife as he could easily have done, did not end Lauranne's life as she had ended Ailsa Rae's.

But he said bitterly, with grim intensity: "*You bitch!*"

"I'm not sorry. You can't make me say I'm sorry. You can break my wrist and use my knife on me—but I'm glad I did it!"

"How did you know we were here?"

"What does it matter. I wanted to see you—oh, no, nothing personal, merely something that you, as Big White Chief of Ceres should have known

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about. And when you didn't come I went, first, to the Boss's office. And there were two officers from the ship just going in with a big case, but the guards wouldn't let me in. And while I was still arguing Kimball came out with the two men from *Thunderqueen*, and told me that you had been there with Pemberthy and Wood about an hour ago . . ."

"You saw Kimball?"

"And why not? Is there a law against it?"

"No. But it may interest you, my dear, to know that the last time I saw the Boss, Wood was sending him on a trip down to the fertiliser tanks. And he had his belly blown out . . ."

"But I saw him. I tell you I saw him . . ."

LATIMER relaxed his grip of his wife's wrists. He wanted time to think things out. It seemed that there was some phoney time element involved—but Lauranne had said that she had seen the Boss *after* she had sent Lane with his message. And the problem was of such importance that it dwarfed into insignificance the fact that at their feet the girl Ailsa was sprawled ungracefully supine, a broken doll. He forgot Ailsa—but Lauranne did not. Before Alan Latimer could stop her she had fallen upon the body, was ripping and thrusting with her knife. And a low moaning sound came from the dead woman's lips, and her right arm went up feebly, jerkily, to ward off the attack, and the right knee flexed and then suddenly straightened. And again there were the spluttering sparks, the smell of ozone. And something small and hairy scuttled on long, spidery legs from under the body, screaming shrilly and wordlessly as it ran. Lauranne threw her knife, but missed. And Latimer jerked himself out of his mood of shocked stupefaction and jumped. He landed squarely on the little monstrosity. And as he stamped its life out with his heavy boots he found himself feeling grateful that he was in uniform and not shod with thin civilian sandals.

He turned to look at his wife, and she stood and looked at him, and the twilight seemed alive with stealthy menace.

He said: "So that's the way of it. That's why Wood never knew me—although he was executive officer of *Thunderqueen* when she picked up *Pathfinder's* boat. And that's why there have always seemed to be too damn many of these people from the ship."

He stooped over the body. It was now as lifeless and as unconvincing as a dressmaker's dummy. It was not even very cleverly made—just a roughly human robot of metal and plastic. Latimer found the knife, himself began to rip and tear. But his use of the weapon was actuated by curiosity rather than viciousness. And he found that the robot had a human brain—part of a human brain—just a sliced and mutilated mass of grey tissue floating in a transparent container, with wiring running from it to the little compartment in the lower part of the body that had housed the alien, the controls of the robot.

"Just a Trojan Horse," murmured Latimer softly. "But how . . . Oh, that's the way it must have been. They're master psychologists, these . . . things. And, given the rough framework as a basis, they could create the illusion of a living, breathing actuality. And they'd have the victim's memory cells to work with . . ."

He held the container in his hands.

"It—she—must still be alive . . ."

And he felt an overwhelming regret that he had never known the real Ailsa Rae—and when his mind slipped into imaginings of what must have been done to her, and to all of *Thunderqueen's* crew, he was glad when Lauranne jerked him back to the present with a voice that was unnaturally harsh.

"SO YOU fell in love with a thing like an overgrown spider ! Aren't you grateful to me for saving you from a fate worse than death ?" She laughed ironically.

"I suppose so," he replied listlessly, ungratefully. "But what was it you wanted me for ?"

"You can take an intelligent interest now, can't you ? Well, I went out through the north-west gate—it's hardly ever used, as you know. And I found a ship's boat. There was a man beside it, he must have died almost as soon as he set foot outside the airlock. The boat itself was damaged—some kind of projectile had smacked clean through the cabin. And the pilot must have been wounded by it, but he got into his suit, and lasted just long enough to get down to Ceres . . ."

"A boat ! Lauranne, this is great ! It means that we can get news through to Earth !" Then his face darkened. For all that he or anybody on Ceres knew Earth had fallen already to the invaders, was overrun with little horrors that scuttled on long, spidery legs, that screamed wordlessly as they ran. But . . . He could not hope to fathom the alien mentality—but it seemed to him that those who had come in the captured liner would hardly have bothered themselves with Ceres, that the penal planetoid was merely the laboratory out of which would come the formula for the conquest of the Solar System.

"We will see the boat," he said.

"What about this ?" Lauranne spurned with her foot the wreckage that had been Ailsa Rae. "And that ?" She pointed with her toe to the pulpy mass out of which protruded one long, many-jointed leg.

"Yes. You're right. If they find this mess the balloon will go up at once. And we shall have no chance either to warn Earth or to put the other plan into effect . . ."

He took the knife, and with its aid scraped a shallow grave. With scant courtesy he pushed the robot's body into it, and then gingerly lifted the crushed remains of the alien and dropped them beside it. He stood with the brain case, the pitiful remnant of what had been the girl Ailsa bobbing gently up and down inside it, in his hands. He made as though to put it into the grave, hesitated, looked at the knife that he had left lying on the ground.

Lauranne snatched it from his hands. She threw it down, snatched up the knife and put all her strength into one, chopping blow. The little plastic sphere split, the fluid and what had been floating in the fluid oozed over the moss.

"And that's all," spat the woman viciously. "Bury it with the rest of the rubbish and come and look at the boat."

THE sun was harshly bright over the north-west face of Ceres when they
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stepped out of the rarely used airlock. The lifeboat was not immediately visible. At first Latimer was inclined to doubt the truth of Lauranne's story, to believe that she had lured him out here for some dark purpose of her own. It so happened that the killing of her rival was not murder, was merely the first minor victory of humankind over the aliens. But he knew that this fact was merely incidental. And he felt for his wife a new respect that was more than the old respect revived. That had never held a tinge of fear. And so he was glad that she was leading the way, that he did not have to bear ever in mind his unprotected back.

"Here we are," said Lauranne suddenly, her voice tinny in the speaker of the helmet set. She was standing on the brink of one of the many craters that pitted the face of Ceres. This one was almost circular, was about fifty feet in depth. The walls were rugged—but it was the ruggedness of molten matter that, in solidifying, has made a permanent record of all the eddies, the liquid turbulence, of its flow. At first the boat was invisible. Only the very extremity of her bows reflected the shaft of sunlight that slanted down into the pit. And then, as the sun rapidly climbed into the black heavens, she was revealed as by the pulling back of a dark curtain.

Carefully, choosing each foot- and hand-hold with caution, Lauranne clambered down into the crater. Latimer followed. And it was not long before he was standing on the fused rocks, looking up at the hull of the boat that was of greater importance to him, and the race, than to the crew of the ship for which it had been supplied.

He shifted his regard to the open airlock, the flimsy, telescopic gangway, and the body that lay at the foot of the spidery contraption. It was that of a man—and though his armour was undamaged he himself had suffered grievous hurt. It was easy to see through the transparent globe of the helmet that one side of the face was dark with clotted blood, that, had the pilot lived, he would never have seen again out of that eye. Latimer looked up to the cabin of the boat. He saw the ragged hole that had been made by the passage of a projectile, decided that the damage had been done by one of the four-inch guns carried by merchantmen as a concession to those who demanded that the liners of space go about their lawful occasions armed. He smiled grimly. If those antiquated weapons couldn't even put a ship's boat completely out of commission—what use would they be against a pirate or a raider from Outside? But all this was irrelevant. He climbed the catwalk into the cabin.

Once inside the little compartment he ignored the bloodstains, the damage that was more spectacular than serious. What held his attention was the log book on the desk by the control panel. He read the words: *Log of the Spaceship Thunderqueen, Voyage 45. Commenced April 14, 2357; Finished. . .*

And where the date should have been filled in, would have been filled in had *Thunderqueen* completed her voyage, was a dark splash. It could have been ink—but Latimer preferred to think that it was blood. It was more symbolic.

WITH clumsy, gloved hands he tried to open the stiff board covers. At his first attempt he found himself reading the details of the liner's loading at Port Curtis, at the second attempt he struck a day's routine record of orbits and positions, all the trivia of a well-run ship. And his third attempt revealed only blank pages.

Lauranne had followed him into the boat.

"Shut the doors!" he ordered. "Both of them." The woman complied. And then Latimer went to the locker in which were kept spares and tools of all kinds, took a sheet of thick, transparent plastic and hurriedly and roughly cut it to shape with the big shears. He took the electric welder out of the box, hoped that there would be enough power in the batteries to operate it. There was. And when the joints had been made to his satisfaction he opened the valve of the emergency air tank, snapped down the switch of the cabin heater.

"Why didn't he . . .?" began Lauranne.

"Maybe he couldn't. It's easy enough when you have two hands to work with—and it's my guess that that poor devil had only one . . ." Latimer was stripping the thick, metal-plated gloves off his hands as he spoke. He flung open the visor of his helmet. And he snatched the log book from the desk and started to read aloud.

VI

SEPTEMBER 7, 2357.

- 00.56 G.M.T.: Screens reported object, relative bearing 047°-342°, on collision orbit. Automatic pilot took avoiding action.
- 01.01 " Orbit and speed to Master's orders. Object, apparently uncharted asteroid, approached for observation and investigation.
- 02.07 " Vessel in closed orbit around object.
- 02.15 " Number Six Lifeboat, Commander E. E. Wood, Cadets J. Perkins and T. Rasmussen, launched.
- 03.03 " Lifeboat observed to make landing. Report received by R.T. from Commander to effect that he and Cadet Rasmussen have left boat to obtain geological specimens, investigate apparent artifact.
- 03.17 " Commander Wood to Captain Pemberthy: "There's a door here, Captain, set in the cliff face. I think I can get it open. We're going in!" Captain Pemberthy to Commander Wood: "Don't. Leave it. Why doesn't he answer?" Communication with the Commander ceased, possibly because of high metallic content of walls of tunnel he had entered. Captain Pemberthy to Cadet Perkins: "Let us know at once as soon as the Commander and Rasmussen come out. Let us know at once if you see anything wrong." Cadet Perkins to Captain Pemberthy: "Ay, ay, sir."
- 04.15 " Cadet Perkins to Captain Pemberthy: "They're coming out now, sir." Captain Pemberthy to Commander Wood: "Well, what did you find?" Commander Wood to Captain Pemberthy: "Nothing."
- 04.45 " Captain Pemberthy to Commander Wood: "What are you waiting for, Wood? Why don't you blast off? Return to the ship at once." Commander Wood to Captain Pemberthy: "Slight converter trouble, sir."
- 05.07 " Lifeboat blasted off from asteroid.
- 05.27 " Number Six Lifeboat in cradle.
05. . . .

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"And then something happened," muttered Latimer. "There's nothing else on this page . . ." he turned over rapidly . . . "nor this . . . Ah, here we are . . . But it's hard to read . . ." He looked at Lauranne, his face grim. "But it was harder to write!" He resumed his reading, slowly and hesitantly as he struggled with the cramped, distorted calligraphy.

September 9—not that it matters what the date is. As long as I have it right for my navigation . . . not that I can do much in a spacesuit with only one good hand. Thank God for the instruments . . . And guess I'd better pray that we do hit Ceres.

This asteroid . . . Didn't bring my work book, couldn't find it. But can remember figures roughly. Elongated elliptical orbit, 63° to Plane Ecliptic. Perihelion November 17, Solar Distance thirty-nine million, Dec.—from Earth—3° 45' north, R.A. 11 17 00. Can't remember odd seconds. And it's for Perihelion.

And get it. Get it. Don't land—blast at long range. Whoever reads this tell them that. Tell them to destroy on sight. Don't land.

This is what happened.

It was my watch when we picked it up. And as Navigator had gone in boat I had to try to compute elements of orbit. Good job I did. Figures here are rough—but should be sufficient. And get it. Get . . .

Boat came back. Wood got out, and two cadets. Walking little stiffly, but all seemed quite natural. Came along to Control lugging dirty big case or chest they'd found and brought with them. And then when Captain asked Wood where he'd been all this time the three pulled the guns they'd taken with them, held us up. Byrne, Second Pilot, jumped for them, shot in belly. Then they shot Cadet West. Seemed as though they did it to keep rest of us quiet or, maybe, testing weapons.

Tied us all up then. Opened chest. And hundreds—thousands—things like spiders came out. Intelligent—could see that way they examined everything. And us.

Rasmussen stayed as guard. Rest went down to passenger quarters. Most of them sleeping—turned out to see asteroid, got bored, turned in again. Couldn't have been much fight—but heard one or two shots. Waited what seemed like hours—then Wood and Perkins came back. One by one took us down to Main Lounge. Place fitted up like operating theatre—was operating theatre. They had their robots ready—just flimsy things of wire and plastic with motor, compartment in body for one of the spider-things. And in head . . .

They opened up people's brain cases. They sliced away most of brain—kept only what they wanted—memory and such. Put this in transparent balls with a mess of wiring, put them in robots' heads. And then robots came alive—weren't any longer ramshackle dummies.

But the blood—and the screaming . . . No anaesthetics, of course. And bodies sprawling around with no tops to their heads—and damned spider-things dipping beaks into what was left of brains . . .

One that tied me didn't make good job. Knots loose. Hoped to get free in time to save Ailsa—but too late . . . All I thought of then was getting away from ship in lifeboat, warning world.

They didn't see me going until almost at after door . . . Made number

3 boat—and whole mob streaming after me. Aliens and people . . . But weren't people—just robots . . . But Ailsa there with rest of them, waving knife . . .

Got into boat—blasted off. And those damned things cleared away gun—let fly at close range. Shell right through control-room—transmitter smashed—face cut—hand broken. Got into spacesuit somehow. Second and third rounds burst right alongside—guess they thought they'd got me. Didn't start drive again till ship well clear . . .

Now—Ceres. Hope they believe me. Must believe me. Use their transmitter . . . warn world. Fifth Column. Trojan Horse. Wonder how fast those things breed ?

Can't write any more. Weak. Hand stiff. Glove stiff. Pencil worn down—can't adjust . . .

Perihelion November 17—Solar Distance thirty-nine million—Dec. three forty-five north—R.A. eleven seventeen zero zero . . . And don't land. Don't land. Destroy on . . .

"And that's all," said Latimer.

WOMANLIKE, following his recital of the dead man's log, Lauranne had been inspecting the fittings of the little cabin. A switch went down under her inquisitive fingers. And, suddenly, there was music—strains that abruptly faded and were replaced by a man's voice.

"On the last pip it will be precisely eighteen hundred, G.M.T.," it said. The measured notes came in strong and clear. Then: "Here is the news . . ." There followed a recital of the past day's events on Earth and in the colonies. There was nothing to merit a headline. There was no word of *Thunderqueen*—not a whisper of alien invasion.

Latimer sighed gustily. "I was always afraid that we were the last, and not the first," he admitted. "But this is as far as they've got." Then: "Hell ! The radio ! It works !"

"Of course it works. Pemberthy and Wood—or the things masquerading as Pemberthy and Wood—went along to our station with Carter. And in charge of the box of tricks right now will be a thing masquerading as Carter . . .

"Here's the way I see it. When they indulge in their fancy brain surgery they help themselves to all the memories of the victim. They know a fair amount about Earth—and they found out about Ceres. This world has been just a laboratory guinea pig. They're working out techniques, finding out how much they can get away with. And when they're ready they'll take over, leave a garrison, and push off in *Thunderqueen* for Earth.

"And if they handle things really well—*nobody will ever know that there's been an invasion.* At least—not until they can afford to come out into the open and slaughter the few real humans who survive . . ."

"And what do we do about it ?"

"Now we have the boat we can warn Earth. What sort of shape is she in ?"

"Not bad . . . but how that poor devil managed to land her—weak as he was and with only one good hand—is more than I can say. The Jovian System is handiest now . . . if we can take the boat there we can use their radio . . ."

"But suppose . . ."

"Have to take that risk. I've checked the fuel. Even to Gannymede it

means free fall most of the way."

"And the other plan—the original?"

"Don't know. But it would be safer. Trouble is that we can't trust Fenwick to go ahead with his part of it unless he has moral support—or a pistol at his back . . ."

"Yes—it would be best. That *and* the boat. And I'll see what I can do with Fenwick . . ."

They clambered out of the lifeboat, down into the pit into which she had been set. As they passed the dead man Latimer thought briefly of giving him decent burial, decided regretfully that there were so many other things of far more pressing importance. And the unknown watch officer of the Jovian liner would not thank them for wasting time on a ceremony that would, shortly, be entirely meaningless.

THE sun had set and the cold struck through their insulated suits. Latimer looked up at the frosty stars, wondered whence had come the little world with its alien invaders. He wondered how many other races had fallen victim to its vampire inhabitants—then dismissed such queries from his mind as being useless. If things went well nobody would ever know anything about the aliens except such scraps of information that survived about their appearance, their methods of waging war. The log of *Thunder-queen* would be the tomb of a race. If Fenwick's doubtful courage would stand the test.

They came to the airlock. Together they entered the prison world of Ceres, with its parks and its gardens, its cargo of broken lives, its freight of menace from beyond the stars. Together they walked along the softly lit corridors, closer to each other than they had been for many a month. And together they entered the park in which the false Ailsa had been killed.

It seemed—here in this world without seasons—that there was the smell of autumn in the air. Every breath they took brought with it the sense of the transitory nature of all things. But the spell was abruptly broken when they came to the grave in which they had buried the shattered remains of alien and robot.

An open, empty trench yawned before their eyes.

IT WAS Fenwick who was first to meet them.

As they hurried over the wide expanse of park they saw a little, agitated figure stumbling towards them. And the grotesque haste of the little man, flitting through the twilight like some agitated bat, served to emphasise the distant mutter of sidarms, the roaring murmur of many voices, of which they had become increasingly conscious.

"Latimer!" gasped Fenwick. "It is you, isn't it? Say it *is* you! They've taken the controls of the moving ways, they hold all the airlocks . . . And our people are holding out in the Marlowe memorial . . ."

"How are they doing?"

"They can't hold much longer. The others have more guns—the only ones that we have are those we've taken from dead bodies. And they aren't bodies, Latimer. They *aren't* bodies . . . I tell you that they're only flimsy affairs of wire and plastic . . . What *are* these things? And they've brought heavy guns from the ship, mounted on carriages, and they're firing them

down the corridors and tunnels . . ."

"Is *the* tunnel clear?"

"I don't know. It was. I came past that way, and I didn't see anybody . . . or *anything* . . . But you're not . . . Say that you're not!"

"I am, Fenwick. *We* are. Come on!"

Latimer pulled out the gun that he had taken from the body of the thing clothed as Ailsa Rae. With his left hand he gripped the arm of the little thief. Lauranne, on the other side, did likewise. They hurried him over the short grass, towards the mouth of the tunnel that would afford the shortest approach to the big, burglar-proof door. Proof—that is—against the common run of cracksmen. But this Fenwick was not of the commonalty. Starbeggotten, his father a spaceman, the faulty insulation of some long-ago broken-up ship had produced in him a mutation, a gift, that could have led to distinction, fame, in the world of science. That would have led to such distinction had it not been for the fatal taint that had brought him to rot on Ceres.

It was an awareness of more dimensions than four. It was the ability with simple tools—or no tools at all—to force the most complicated lock of Man's devising to his will. It was a gift that could have been used to unlock the ultimate secrets of matter. And it was a gift that had been used to unlock safes and the vaults of banks.

It was a gift that, in the end, would procure for its owner a world for a funeral pyre.

As they left the park the thunder of gunfire became louder, more ominous. The crackle of the smaller weapons was almost continuous, and now and again would come the deep, reverberating boom of the artillery. Latimer thought of his men hemmed in the Marlowe Memorial, wished vainly that he was with them. And he wished that he had some way of letting them know that the rearguard action they were fighting was not in vain, that every minute gained contributed to the ultimate downfall of the invaders.

There had been fighting along this tunnel. There were the bodies of men and women. Some few had been shot in the head—those corpses had not been violated. The majority had been killed by body wounds. Every battlefield in Man's long, bloody history has known the plunder of the slain—but never such gruesome pillage as this . . .

AT THE mouth of the tunnel leading to the door to the power plant there were four guards. They wore robot bodies—their own flimsy anatomies could never have hoped to handle the heavy guns that they carried. But these were no robots clothed in the illusion of flesh and blood. They had a rough, scarecrow similarity to humankind—and that was all.

Unaccountably—they hesitated. It may have been that they took the three running towards them for their own kind. Although that, in view of their undeniable telepathic powers, is doubtful. But they hesitated. It was only for a split second—but it was enough. The circuits and relays actuating their mechanical muscles could never hope to equal the speed with which Latimer aimed and fired. The sound of gunfire was thunderous in the tunnel, and before the last echoes had even considered dying all four of the alien guards were down, each with an explosive slug in the compartment in which lived the controlling intelligence.

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And Fenwick was down.

He was not dead—one of the bullets fired by the guards had struck the tunnel wall back against which he was crouched. The explosion had driven fragments of stone deep into his side. He was not dead—yet. Lauranne knelt beside him, doing what little she could, whilst Latimer collected the weapons of their fallen enemies.

The wounded man writhed, and groaned.

"Stay with me," he pleaded. "Don't let them open my head . . . Don't . . ." He clung to Lauranne's hand, looked up at her with the pleading eyes of a hurt spaniel.

"I'll stay," she promised.

With pistols stowed all around his person, Alan Latimer came to his wife and Fenwick.

"How is he?" he demanded, little of gentleness in his tone.

"He'll last," replied the woman. "Long enough . . ."

They picked up the wounded man, carried him to the huge, gleaming door that blocked the tunnel. They set him down on the stone floor. They looked in baffled wonderment at the array of wheels and dials and symbols set on the metal surface. It seemed to them that even if one should have the right combination the opening of the way to the power station would be a task only to be undertaken after prayer and fasting.

Fenwick looked up at the door too. It was not the first time he had seen it. When he arrived on Ceres he had been taken by Kimball, who had heard of his gifts, to make an inspection. The Boss had asked him then if he could open the door without unleashing the doom that lay behind it. Truthfully, he had replied no. If he had been able to answer yes he would have been, after the Boss, the most powerful man in Ceres.

Now he was the most powerful man in Ceres.

And the irony of it was that, if he were asked the same question as before, the answer would be an unqualified affirmative.

IN THE past the power that lay within his mind had been a wild talent, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. It had been impossible to concentrate, to hold the flickering picture steady. Not that it was ever a picture—the word is used merely for convenience. But the sense of perception came and went, faded and waxed strong, faded again not to return for hours, or days, or months. Now, with the changes wrought in his brain and neural structure by pain, by the slight decomposition that precedes the death of a living organism, the picture was bright and steady. And his mind, as it were, went out and handled the beautiful intricacies of lever and tumbler, electronic flow and magnetic field.

And understood.

"Are you sure you can tackle it?" Latimer demanded.

"Of course I'm sure. I . . ."

He tried to rise to his feet, reached for the nearest wheel, fell heavily. And a growing, glistening pool on the floor where he had fallen was mute testimony to the inadequacy of Lauranne's rough bandaging. He looked up at them, his wizened, grey little face contorted with pain.

"I can do it," he whispered. "I can see the levers and tumblers. But one of you will have to turn the dials . . ." Then—"But I don't want to die.

I don't want to die!"

"You're a dying man now," Latimer said brutally. "And even if you should survive until *They* find you—*They'll* slice your head open and whip out as much of your brain as they want. This is your one chance to get even, Fenwick. You have to go—but when you do you'll take *Them* with you. And you're the only man that can do it!"

"No!" cried the other. Then again, in a shrill, high voice, "No!"

Lauranne reached out. She snatched one of the pistols from her husband's belt. She cocked it—making sure that this simple operation was performed as noisily as possible. She pressed the cold muzzle against Fenwick's neck.

"Now will you do it?"

"Yes. Yes! That dial there—the top right-hand one. Turn it to D-O-O-M-S-D-A-Y . . ."

"Doomsday?" She struck Fenwick across the face with the barrel of the weapon. She struck him again. He started to scream—but she struck him yet a third time . . .

"Stop it!" shouted Latimer. "You're smashing the poor devil's face!"

"I know it. Now, Fenwick—this 'Doomsday' of yours. That word has an ominous ring . . . Could it be . . ." her voice was low, almost caressing . . . "that the dial you want me to turn is one of the controls of whatever safety device this door must have?" She raised the pistol threateningly. "Answer me!"

"Yes . . ." whimpered the little crook. "Yes. Don't touch the dials. Just the wheels. And don't . . . Don't!"

She said: "If you're lying again *They* won't find any head on you worth cutting open."

"That lower right-hand wheel . . ." babbled Fenwick. "Take it. Turn it to oh three seven—then left-handed to three four six. Right-handed to oh three five . . ."

"Wait." She turned away from the wounded man, left him dabbing ineffectual hands at the blood streaming from his battered face. She ran back along the tunnel to where Alan Latimer was standing, guns ready, poised to fight off alien interruption. She caught his arm, pushed her face close to his, whispered: "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"What?"

"The boat, you fool. Aren't you supposed to be galloping off to warn the System?"

"Not now. We can't leave Fenwick by himself to open the door. We must stay."

"Only one of us need stay . . ."

"Of course. You'll find the boat fairly easy to handle. And remember—free fall as much of the way as possible."

"I can't handle a boat. Given unlimited fuel for experiments I might make Gannymede—provided that the air and food and water hung out. You must go."

"But we can't leave Fenwick."

"I shan't leave him."

Then Latimer turned to face his wife. He said: "You're right. Of course you're right. But can't you see that *I can't go*?"

Lauranne said bitterly: "If Ailsa Rae were sitting in that space scow

AND ALL DISASTROUS THINGS

waiting for you you'd be off like a shot! Go, damn you! Do you think that I want to die with you after what has happened?"

Latimer turned white under his tan. His lips worked, but he said nothing. Then, at last, the bitter words came. "Take these," he said, pulling two of the pistols from his belt. "You might want to shoot me in the back."

He turned abruptly, strode down the tunnel. Lauranne stood and watched him go, half raised her arms, let them fall hopelessly to her side. "You fool," she whispered. "You fool. Of course I don't want to die with you. I want to live with you!"

Slowly, listlessly, she made her way back to where Fenwick, an untidy bundle of rags, was sprawled on the tunnel floor. She looked down at the dying man, then at her wrist watch. "Thirty minutes at least," she muttered. "Have to give him thirty minutes to get to the boat, fifteen to get clear at maximum acceleration . . . And *this* will pass out on me if I'm not careful." Brutally, she kicked Fenwick in his wounded side. He screamed, jerked awake.

"And you'll keep awake until I'm ready to open the door," she snarled, "if I have to beat you into a pulp to do it . . ."

And down the tunnel drifted the sound of gunfire, fainter but still continuing, showing that some few defenders yet were gaining for her the time she needed.

"AND that's that," said the Admiral. He was pleased with himself, had good reason to be so. The forces under his command had made a landing, had taken prisoners without loss to themselves, had blasted a little world into a thin, faintly luminous haze. And when the Admiral let his mind stray to those same prisoners—obscene, spidery things that scuttled about their cages on many-jointed, flimsy legs—he felt no compunction over the act of destruction that he had performed.

"Where's that fellow Latham . . . Latimer?" he demanded of an aide. "Think I'll have him up for a drink . . ."

But Latimer did not come. Instead came a messenger who told of how the ex-Lieutenant had burst into the prison compartment, had opened fire with two pistols, slaughtered the helpless aliens. The guards had tried to stop him. One had been killed outright—the other was not expected to live.

"And he was saying something," concluded the messenger. "I couldn't make it out, sir, but it sounded like poetry. Something about old loves, and dead years, and disastrous things, it sounded like.

"But that was just before he shot himself."

THE END



NEW WORLDS



MANHUNT

By CEDRIC WALKER

The fame of Man had spread before him throughout the System, even to worlds he had never visited.

Illustrated by HUNTER

TIKI hummed softly to himself as he wandered through the forest. The forest sang back at him. The trees lifted their huge fronds and rustled them gently at his passing. The flame-flowers gave voice in their thin, flutelike tones. He patted one as he passed and it rubbed against his hand, stretching out on its stalk until he was out of range.

The Little Creatures came out, running, hopping, crawling, gazing up at him hopefully. But he shook his head and smiled. No play to-day—he had something he wanted to think about. One couldn't play all the time! After all, he was growing big now, and there were more important things to do! Things to be thought about! Like his father did—and the other grown-ups. So he ignored the twitterings and pipings around him and passed on. Relenting, he called over his shoulder: "Some other time, perhaps. Can't to-day."

He reached the glade and sat down under the shade of his favourite tree.

MANHUNT

It would have started a conversation but he shushed it quickly. It rustled its leaves sulkily but relapsed into obedient silence.

PHEW ! But it was hot ! He loosened his toga a little more, and lay back against the massive bole of the tree. Some of the Little Creatures came and sat in a wide semi-circle around him. He looked at them and at the beauty of the forest.

Was *their* world like this ? Did they have trees and flowers and forests just like this ? He searched through his mind, eagerly recalling every scrap of information his father and others had ever given him—or that he had managed to overhear—about the fabulous Earthmen.

In school they told them the Earthmen were a mighty race who had spread out amongst the stars, conquering all manner of terrible beasts, defying the very elements, laughing even into the face of space and time—things which his race would never have dreamed of doing ! They had colossal machines to span the void and others to produce power inconceivable ! The boy's face glowed. The Earthmen must be mighty beings indeed ! Of course, *his* race had machines—of a sort—driven by wind and water, such as the one on which his toga had been made. But they didn't count. They were dull and uninteresting. In fact, everything became dull and uninteresting when one thought of these other creatures reaching out to the stars in their thundering mechanisms, searching for and finding adventure !

When he voiced his enthusiasm to his father all he got was a smile and a shake of the grey old head. "They will find nothing on all the myriad worlds they have over-run that they could not have found on their home-planet—wherever that may be," he would say. "We have found what we want on our own world—what need have we to go flying off into the unknown darkness ?" His eyes would grow distant. "Perhaps they seek something . . ."

Privately, Tiki pooh-poohed such sentiments. His imagination was fired by the glorious exploits of the Earthmen. They must be gods indeed ! Yet his father had told him there was only one God—and, of course his father was right . . . And yet . . .

And to think—his heart gave a little leap of joy—they were actually on this planet !—and not very far away from this district ! At least so the rumours said ! Of course, they had been on Lareena for many, many years—but they were few in number and Tiki's people travelled little—besides which they had no real interest in their uninvited guests—and thus far no contact had been made with this particular district.

THE people were quite content to wait until such time as the Earthmen sought them out, when, of course, they would be as hospitable as was natural to them. Meantime they listened to the never-ending rumours about them that reached the village from time to time, marvelled—for a moment—then went about their business. It was really little concern of theirs. All except a few—like Tiki—who hoped and prayed that the incredible Earthmen would not quit the planet before they had a chance to meet them !

What would they be like ? Would they be huge and fierce and violent as became their reputation ? Rumour had cast them in all kinds of moulds. They were everything from monstrous insects to the legendary "draxil,"

yet the overall conception was of a definite humanoid creature, differing little in outward appearance from the Lareenians themselves. Though they were said to wear armour most of the time—though why anyone should want to wear armour on this peaceful world was beyond him.

His mind drifted on. He thought of their gardens—did they have gardens? But they must have. And flowers. Father said there was no reason to assume that they had any of these things—but that was silly, of course! How could they not have? They couldn't have a lot of country just bare—that was ridiculous! And Little Creatures? Those too. How dreadful a world, without those! The thought made him shiver. He stretched out his hand and tickled one of the brown furry things behind the ear.

There was a rustle from amidst the undergrowth at the far side of the glade. He did not look up. That would be Chuno, come to tell him all his troubles as usual; the difficulty of overcoming the exuberance of his new litter and so on. He knew he could always depend on a sympathetic ear from Tiki, but to-day he was going to be disappointed.

THE seconds sped by. No Chuno. Strange. The boy looked up. There was the crack of a twig in the undergrowth. An uneasy shiver trembled through the forest. The tree behind him was muttering to itself. The Little Creatures had set up an excited twittering. Another voice joined in. And another—till the whole forest whispered its alarm into Tiki's ear.

He got to his feet. "What is it?" he asked. But the little ones had scampered away suddenly and hidden themselves in the bushes, and the trees made no answer, but drew their branches closer around them.

Cold fear rippled through the boy. There were no inimical creatures on Lareena and violence was virtually unknown. Yet from a dark place in the depths of his mind something heaved to the surface—something from a long-forgotten past when his ancestors had crawled and flopped in the slime, struggling desperately for that little extra speed that might have saved them. So Tiki shivered.

Then the branches parted and a figure appeared. And Tiki knew at once that it was an Earthman!

He gazed in awe at the creature. Jubilation and terror and wonder tussled inside him. His knees felt suddenly weak, and without realising quite what he was doing he crouched down upon the ground and covered his head. Tremblingly he waited, the image of the Earthman etched indelibly on his brain.

He perceived dimly—though his mind refused to work—that they had been correct those who had insisted on the humanoid aspect of the Earthmen. They *were* like the Lareenians. Incredibly so! Though the garments he had noted briefly had seemed coarse and dark and ill-fitting, and the countenance wore an expression rarely seen on the calm faces of his people—stern—and something else which he couldn't put a name to . . .

Nothing happened. There was no sound. Dare he glance up?

The Earthman had not moved. A shadow—was it uncertainty?—passed slowly over his face. He cast swift glances to left and right, made as if to turn, and hesitated. Tiki stared at him transfixed. The man looked back. Slowly his face softened into a smile. He seemed to relax. He took two paces towards the boy and stopped. The rustle of the forest died away.

The multitudinous murmurings ceased. The Little Creatures began to drift back.

The Earthman spoke. It was an odd sound—with queer slurrings and hesitations—but unmistakably—and incredibly—Lareenian !

"Please—get up. I'm not going to eat you."

A stir of amazement passed through the forest. "What did he say ?" the flame-flowers fluted, inquisitively, as always. "Who is he ?"

"Be silent !" the boy told them impatiently, his mind full of the wonder of his miraculous good fortune.

"What did you say then ?" said the Earthman, frowning. "I'm afraid I didn't understand."

The boy was puzzled for a moment. He had lost a little of his fear now. Then he understood. "I was speaking to the forest. They're eager to know all about you," he said, smiling shyly.

THE Earthman's eyes shone. "Then it's true ! Incredible !" He seemed to retreat into himself for a moment, and his lips moved as if he were repeating some thought. Tiki waited, not daring to interrupt him. They're not half so fearsome as we were told, he thought. Not fearsome at all, in fact ! And they *didn't* wear armour ! But he was tall—almost six feet !—and although he was powerfully built his eyes were soft and tinged with something the boy could not quite place, though it was certainly not the expression one expected to find in the eyes of a people whose boundless energy had taken them to the ends of the universe ! And there was something else—something the boy had least expected to find in connection with the fabulous, vigorous Earthmen. The stranger looked tired ! His shoulders were hunched as if with fatigue, and there were rents here and there in his clothing. Concern for his idol over-shadowed the remnants of his fear, and he said : "We should be greatly honoured if you would accept the hospitality of our village."

If the words seemed incongruous to the Earthman he gave no sign. The inculcation of good manners was one of the keynotes of child education on Lareena. He merely nodded. The child held out his hand. The man gazed at it for a long moment as if it were a strange object and a quiver relaxed the stern features. Without a word he clasped it and they left the glade, the man matching his stride to the boy's trot. The Little Creatures trailed behind, twittering in annoyance at being so ignored.

There were a million things Tiki wanted to ask the Earthman, so many that when he opened his mouth they all bubbled out together in an incoherent splutter and caused him to blush furiously. That made the stranger laugh and Tiki was glad because when he did so some of the creases in his forehead vanished. He laughed with him. The man said : "You know what I am, then, son ?"

It struck Tiki as odd that the man should call him "son" when obviously . . . but the thought was lost in a welter of new ones. "We know all about you," he said proudly. "They teach us about you in school."

"Do they ?"

"Everything ! About the wonderful machines in which you travel amongst the stars ! About all the worlds you've conquered and how you always defeat the monsters !"

"Yes," murmured the man, "so many, many worlds . . . So they tell you that, do they? And what else do they tell you?"

"Oh! lots and lots of things!" the boy's mind slipped, childlike, into a new channel, "Oh, just wait until they see who I'm bringing with me! My! Just wait! . . ."

"Lots and lots of things . . ." the Earthman muttered, but Tiki was so engrossed with his glorious vision of the scene to come that he didn't hear the soft-spoken words.

THE memory of those first few moments never dimmed. The awed silence; the slack, gaping mouths, the protruding eyes; the initial timidity and unobtrusive backing-away while Tiki stood his ground and laughed uproariously at the fuss they were making. What a proud, trembling moment!

Then it was all over. The hubbub was finished. The populace, their heritage of good manners surging to the forefront, had ceased to crowd the Earthman and dispersed, against their will, to allow him the rest and sustenance he so obviously needed. By mutual consent he was allotted a room in the house of Tiki's father. Nothing else, of course, would have satisfied the boy.

The stranger had been very quiet throughout the hectic period of welcoming, only nodding and smiling and murmuring a few appropriate words, but after he had bathed and eaten would be plenty of time to put to him all the questions that battled for precedence. Always provided he didn't wish to rest, of course. So Tiki restrained and consoled himself and was all the more horrified when, after he had eaten briefly, the Earthman rose and announced that he really must go.

His host protested mildly, it being in bad taste to attempt to move a person against his will. But he was manifestly surprised. Tiki, however, was not yet so thoroughly inhibited. He gave voice to his dismay in no uncertain terms, even to the extent of ignoring his father's gentle admonishments.

"But you can't go! You can't just walk off!" the boy was near to tears, "I want to ask you—oh! dozens and dozens of things—and besides you've only just come! —"

The Earthman said nothing but he glanced at the boy's father as if he would speak. "Leave us!" the latter said to Tiki in so unusually stern terms that the boy did so without further word.

He went disconsolately to his room and sat on the divan by the window. He felt suddenly deflated. It wasn't turning out at all as he'd imagined. He'd thought of sitting round for hours listening in breathless wonder while his idol told tale after marvellous tale of the exploits of his race in far-off galaxies. Of himself reflecting just a little of the stranger's glory. Now it seemed as if the Earthman was going as mysteriously as he had arrived!

But he did not go. And Tiki's father, in telling them this, had a look on his face that Tiki had seen only rarely before, a look of intense thought and also—inexplicably—of anger. Shortly he left the house to seek out some of his friends. The Earthman was sleeping and not to be disturbed.

IN the days that followed Tiki was rarely absent from the Earthman's side, except during the hours when he was obliged to continue with his studies. He became to the Earthman what the Little Creatures had once

been to him. At first the man tried to shoo him away, but after a time he hardly seemed to notice him. He was a strangely silent, seemingly unemotional being, and soon Tiki found himself accepting the fact that the visions of conversational wonders were hardly likely to materialise. He contented himself with observing the Earthman's activities—and indeed, these were mysterious enough.

Daily, the man would ascend to the summit of a hill overlooking the village, throw back his sleeve to reveal an odd, shining, bangle-like thing on his wrist, and sit gazing at it for long minutes—sometimes hours—without for a moment relaxing his attention. Tiki spoke to him once or twice early in these spells of concentration, but his companion did not hear him, or if he did he ignored him.

He seemed to be forever on the alert for something; his gentle eyes roved sky and land endlessly, especially sky.

But the boy did glean one or two crumbs of information from his strangely reticent, alien companion. His name, for instance. And unimportant and inconsequential as it was, the fact of alone being the possessor of this knowledge gave the boy infinite pleasure. The Earthman had smiled when he asked the question. He'd appeared to think for a moment. His face had become like a screen upon which memories of the past appeared and vanished, and his mouth had twisted slightly to one side as if he were in sudden pain. He said: "You can call me Frank, if you wish."

"Frank—Frank," echoed the boy, liking the way it fell neatly from his tongue. And he wondered why the stranger smiled. But, then, he often smiled when for the life of him the boy could see nothing to smile about. He supposed it was just the Earthman's way.

Once Tiki ventured to enquire the whereabouts of the Earthman's vessel—he always thought of him as "the Earthman" even after he learnt his name—but the man was very vague and reticent about the subject. He merely waved his arm generally in the direction of the forest, and Tiki had to be contented with the knowledge that it had landed somewhere in that vast area. His inner longings to be allowed to visit and explore the mighty alien craft suffered a serious set-back.

Too, when Tiki asked him what he was looking for all the time all he said was: "You'll know one day, perhaps, when you can understand." Which was pretty cold comfort to the boy. Definitely, things were not working out as he'd expected. What a nuisance it was being so young! How he longed to be able to listen-in to the many long conversations the Earthman had with some of the leaders of the village—Tiki's father among them. But they always shooed him away.

THEN suddenly there was another Earthman in their midst—or rather, Earthwoman! Tiki was never quite sure where she came from—nor how she came. But he saw the jubilation with which his Earthman greeted the newcomer and he was glad, for his sake. Part of the veil of sadness was lifted from the Earthman's eyes but much still remained. The two spent long hours huddled together on the hillock in earnest discussion. Tiki had feared that he would not be permitted to accompany his friend as in the past in view of the new situation, but his fears proved groundless. Neither made any objections to his presence. Perhaps it was that the Earthman had

grown accustomed to him. Perhaps the stranger really liked him, it was difficult to say, since the man rarely showed emotion save for his habitual air of sadness—which Tiki had accepted as part of his natural outlook and scarcely noticed now—and his occasional twisted smiles.

The only snag was that they spoke for the most part in their mother-tongue. However, the Earthman had, in his several moments of communicativeness in the past, taught the boy one or two of the queer-sounding words his race used for language, and the hoy, with the adaptability of youth, had picked it up reasonably well, with the result that he was able to pick out one or two of the details of the conversation, though the main trend was beyond him. He noted that the word "space-ship" cropped up quite often, usually to be followed in the same breath by "escape" and a general nodding of heads in the direction of the forest, but the import of this eluded him. And his mind did not connect this with the fact that presently other Earthmen began to drift quietly into the village, usually alone but sometimes in two's and three's.

The village seethed. Such happenings had not been known in generations, excitement and wonder were new feelings for the majority of the Lareenians. The Earthmen—male and female—all fine specimens physically, and all baving the same odd expression about their eyes, were quartered in a magnificent building which was vacated for them. All except Frank, who remained in the home of Tiki's father—Tiki wondered momentarily why—while spending most of his time with his compatriots. Meetings became regular events and there was a good deal of co-operation from the Lareenians. A general air of planning pervaded the place.

Tiki watched all this in rising wonder and not a little curiosity. Where were all the Earthpeople coming from? Why did they steal in in small groups or singly from the forest? What were they planning? And most important of all—where was their space-ship? But no one told him. And there was no report of a vessel anywhere in the vicinity. News travelled very slowly in Lareena. The nearest village was a hundred miles away and the only means of communication was on foot or on the broad hacks of the grula.

LIFE settled back to normal in the village. The planning went on, rapidly but without bustle. Without warning the storm burst.

They were on the hillock overlooking the village. The Earthman was once more concentrating into the object on his wrist—Tiki had discovered that it was some form of communication and accounted for the presence of the Earthman's friends.

The boy sat, cross-legged, watching the other, his hand idly stroking one of the Little Creatures, which sat or lay or hung around the two humans. When he was thus engaged the Earthman came unaccompanied by any of his fellows. Tiki had learnt that he must be silent on these occasions and not move—and had instructed the Little Creatures accordingly.

It started as a faint humming, swelling rapidly into a thunderous roar. The air throbbed from the heats of a giant hand. It appeared as if by magic in the air above the village, a mountainous, shining hulk, from which presently small pieces began to detach themselves and drift earthwards.

The boy cowered. He glanced at the other. The Earthman had leaped to

his feet and was watching the scene, his face expressionless. But his body was tensed. He made to go down the slope then stopped. His shoulders slumped.

The boy's fear had evaporated. "A space-ship!" he cried joyfully, "it's a space-ship! Come on!" And, without glancing round, he set off down the hill at breakneck speed. At last! At last! His heart pounded with joy.

He reached the outskirts and ran on down the broad avenue that led to the central park of the village, above which hovered the huge Earth vessel.

Then he stopped dead. The glad cry strangled in his throat. It was a scene of horror. The green beauty of the park was covered by a heaving mass of struggling forms. The objects which he had seen descending from the space-ship had resolved into men—Earthmen!—but a different kind of Earthmen! These were clad in suits of shining armour and their faces, glimpsed through the transparent helmets, were fierce and set. They had weapons in their hands which sent forth a beam of fire. Tiki cried out in horror as he saw a beam touch one of the figures. There was a flash and a puff of smoke and a charred, unrecognisable object slumped to the ground. He realised with amazement that the newcomers were attacking only the guests of the village!—the Earthmen! Then they themselves could not be Earthmen, for why should Earthmen attack Earthmen? These beings in armour were some other alien creatures, come to attack and kill his friends. A terrible thought struck him. They would do the same to Frank! He must be warned!

He took one last look at the scene of carnage. It was almost over. Crumpled, blackened objects lay sprawled all around, and the once-pleasant park was bespattered with blood and dirt. The surviving Earthmen—mostly female, Tiki noticed—were being borne aloft, struggling and kicking, by the armoured invaders.

Tiki wanted to cry, but the tears would not come. With a tightness in his throat, he turned and ran from the scene.

WHEN he regained the hillock there was no sign of his Earthman. "Where did he go?" he enquired of the Little Creatures.

"Into the forest—there!" said one of the little brown furry things. "He seemed very tired." It pointed with one of its paws.

Tiki went into the forest. He kept on running until a hand shot out from behind a tree and jerked him to a standstill.

"Where do you think you're going?" said the Earthman. The child began to babble out the grim events he had witnessed, but the other cut him short. "I know," he said, "yes, I know. Now you'd better get home to your father. They won't harm you."

"No," said Tiki, "I'm going with you."

"With me?" The man smiled twistedly. "Go home!"

"No." The boy stood his ground stubbornly. For a moment it seemed as though the Earthman would strike him. Then he turned and walked on. Tiki waited until he was out of sight, then he followed him. His trail was unmistakable to the boy.

The Earthman set a stiff pace, but Tiki hung on doggedly. He wasn't going back now! Darkness fell, and, listening, the boy knew that the other had stopped. He was probably waiting until the moon came up before

carrying on. Tiki crept forward silently until he was close enough to hear the Earthman's breathing. He could just make him out, a dim form sitting with his back to a tree, head bent, face immobile. So much the stars told him.

Then the Earthman turned his head and looked him full in the face.

So unexpected was the movement that Tiki leapt back, turning in flight as he did so. His foot came down on a fallen branch and he fell, twisting . . . He tried to rise and a shaft of pain lanced through his body.

The moon rose, leaping rapidly up the sky. By its light the Earthman came to him. His gentle fingers felt the injured ankle, and removed the sandal. He said nothing. He didn't ask him why he'd followed him, and for some strange reason the boy was glad.

When he'd fixed the ankle the Earthman rose. "I must go now," he said.

"I'll come with you," the boy said.

"Can you walk?"

The boy got to his feet. He took two paces then he stumbled and fell, crying out.

"You must stay here," said the Earthman. He made him comfortable against a tree, then left him. At the edge of the clearing he hesitated and looked back. The boy smiled at him. The Earthman came back and picked the boy up in his arms. It appeared to cost him little effort.

IT was just after the second moon had arisen that they heard the first sounds of pursuit. A low humming in the distance and a faint flash. The Earthman quickened his steps. Presently they heard a crashing in the forest behind them.

"I wanted to warn you," said the boy.

The Earthman said nothing but he looked down at the boy and smiled.

Tiki could feel the rising warmth of the Earthman's body against his. He listened to the man's breath rasping in his throat, growing quicker and quicker, and marvelled at his strength. They had been travelling for hours! The noises behind were getting louder. The full force of the situation was borne in upon him for the first time, and he struggled in the man's arms to release himself.

"Keep still!" commanded the Earthman, but there was no urgency in his voice. He said it quite matter-of-factly. Without warning he stepped to one side, weaving his way with great care in amongst the bushes. He lowered the boy gently to the ground, silencing him with a low murmur. Together they crouched, waiting.

A harsh voice sounded about a hundred yards away.

"Careful, Bill, he's the trickiest of the lot! Can't be so far away!"

"By God! They've led us a merry chase!" came a second, grumbling. "Damn these Lareenians! Why the devil don't they clear this blasted jungle? Get some decent roads! Automobiles! They're just the sort of dimwits to sympathise with them! Maybe we should have turned the beams on them, too! Hey! Why don't we, anyway?"

"Policy. High-level stuff. Try to get their co-operation on friendly terms first. If that fails . . ." The man made a noise and his companion laughed.

"D'you reckon the Lareenians knew what they were?"

"Dunno. I heard a rumour, though—something about the androids being the work of man and man being the work of God—so that makes the androids

the work of God, too ! Crazy !”

“Aint it, though ! Reckon Mostyn should have been strangled at birth. Wouldn’t have been no androids then.”

“You must admit they take a lot of the dirty work off our hands.”

“Yeah—the females come in handy, too !”

The other laughed. Tiki felt the Earthman stir by his side, and wondered what these other creatures were talking about.

Another voice cut in, commandingly. “All right, men ! We’re going to beam this area ! He’s round here somewhere ! Stand back.”

With a rapidity that left the boy momentarily confused the Earthman rose to his feet and vanished amongst the trees. A moment later Tiki heard his voice away off to the right.

There was a sudden outcry, a blinding flash, then silence. After a while a low humming came to the boy’s ears. Then it, too, faded, and there was nothing.

WHEN the explanations were over Tiki said: “Father, who were those horrible beasts ? And why did they kill the Earthmen ?”

“Those horrible beasts——” The father paused and gazed fondly at his son.

“They will come back, won’t they ? The Earthmen will come back ?”

“Yes, son, they’ll come back—one day . . .”

THE END

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

ALMOST half the next issue will be taken up by a long novelette from Arthur J. Burks, whose name is more than well known amongst fantasy readers. “Hydra” is a new hitherto unpublished story of his which may *possibly* explain some of our myths and legends. Short stories by E. C. Tubb, F. G. Rayer and J. T. M’Intosh maintain a high standard for the issue.

Space providing, a new department entitled “Post Mortem” will commence—being discussions between readers, authors and editor upon points from previous stories.

THE final ratings on the last issue produced one surprise—a short story taking precedence over the long novelette !

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|-----------------------|----|----|------------------|
| 1. Chemical Plant | .. | .. | Ian Williamson |
| 2. Guardian Angel | .. | .. | Arthur C. Clarke |
| 3. Deus Ex Machina | .. | .. | F. G. Rayer |
| 4. Robots Don’t Bleed | .. | .. | J. W. Groves |
| 5. Spirit of Earth | .. | .. | Sydney J. Bounds |
| 6. Bighead | .. | .. | William de Koven |

Many thanks to all you readers who sent in cards or letters. It is impossible to reply to all of them, but they *are* appreciated.

NEW WORLDS.

LIFE CYCLE

By PETER HAWKINS

Salvaging a space wreck was a routine matter. But how combat an alien stowaway who couldn't be seen?

Illustrated by QUINN

THE stars wheeled around as Murphy jetted himself towards the largest portion of the split hulk of the *Denebian Wanderer*. The outlines of the ship's bared ribs cut geometrical patterns against the rotating stars, filling in gradually as Murphy approached the wreck. Momentarily the third and smallest fragment of the interstellar ship occulted the sun, weak and tiny out here near Jupiter's orbit. For a second Murphy looked back over his shoulder, past the flaring yellow jet on his back at section two, the part of the ship he had just left. Tiny blue lights of cutting arcs glittered against the blackness of the metal, pinpointing dismantling crews carving plates from the framework of the hull.

Murphy jiggled the jet on his back to bring him up to the airlock on section one. He pushed himself through, expecting Kellard to be there waiting for him, ready to grab his arm and chatter about his discovery—whatever it was. He'd talk volubly for minutes without letting his listener get in a single word in reply, then dry up expecting a critical analysis of his statement. So far Murphy had managed to be non-committal without being rude; he felt, however, that the time was approaching when Kellard, even though he was the Zoological Society's representative, should be put firmly in his place.

How could anything, he asked himself, affect the remains of the *Denebian Wanderer*? She'd dropped out of hyperspace, broken in three near Jupiter's orbit and the Zoological Society had chartered Murphy's company to salvage the ship. Murphy's men were doing just that; he decided to make the point clear to Kellard if the biologist kept trying to borrow men from the team for his own work.

Murphy dropped in at the switchboard room.

"Lo Milton. Where's Kellard?" he asked the operator.

The ever-cheerful Milton smiled.

"In the dissection room. He's found a beast here on One that wasn't listed as one of the animals captured on the Deneb worlds . . ."

"A beast. Oh!" Murphy felt his face muscles tightening. He foresaw trouble. If the beast could be considered dangerous he would have to call back to company offices on Mars for special protection. Neither Kellard nor his Society would like that; the *Wanderer* had caused them enough trouble already.

"Have you seen the thing?"

"Yes—nothing startling. Kellard and Doc Hayter are in there taking it apart. It's not much bigger than a giraffe; looks something like one too, except for claws and six legs . . ."

"You mean apart from its long neck it's like nothing else in the system?"

Milton grinned, pressing down two buttons on his board.

"Yes Mr. Kellard?"

The reply was audible only as a vague crackle. Milton repeated his "yes" routine to the caller and turned to Murphy.

"Mr. K. wants to know very urgently what's happened to you. He wasn't very polite."

"He's waiting until I've taken off my suit; tell him that if he calls again."

MURPHY edged out of the little cubby hole along to his own room. In a matter of moments he slipped out of his suit and was walking along the corridor to the dissection room. The beast he thought, must have been pretty tough to have survived in open space for some weeks since the *Wanderer* broke up. That implied it didn't breathe at all, that it could exist at absolute zero temperatures.

Kellard and Hayter were each occupied with a microscope when Murphy opened the door. The room stank abominably with a mixture of chemicals and completely alien smells. Murphy found the result hard to describe; it was far from pleasant. He slid the door shut behind him, waiting for either Hayter or Kellard to look up from his work. Hayter finished with his specimen first. He straightened up, feeling the small of his back and stretching as if he had been standing in the same position for some time. He nodded to Murphy, eyes smiling beneath black, bushy eyebrows.

"We've got something unusual here. Bryant found it on the upper part of the navigation dome this morning. It hadn't been dead ten minutes . . ."

"But . . ."

"It's a fact." Hayter turned on a tap and rinsed his hands. "It had only just been killed, we think."

"Where is it?"

"In the refrigerator at present. I've got part of its innards here if you'd like to have a look."

Murphy applied his eye to the binocular microscope. For a second he studied the purple channels and lines, then straightened up.

"Means nothing to me," he admitted.

"About the same as it does to me at present." Hayter dropped the cloth on which he had been wiping his hands. "The purple is stain anyway, and Kellard," he glanced at the biologist, "thinks it's digestive tract . . ." Hayter showed a tendency to ramble in his talk at times.

"What killed it, though?" Murphy asked.

"We don't know; Kellard thinks another of its own kind. They came to a scrap over something. He reckons they're hungry and want food. There's no food they know, so they turn on each other."

"That means there's another one about somewhere?"

"Presumably, but I should think it's pretty far gone if it's got to the state of trying to eat its fellows . . ."

"What's it been living on till now?"

"Reserves—or it might have been hibernating. Several possibilities. Kellard's the biologist; you'd better ask him when he's finished. Now if it was a nice filthy appendix you wanted removed I could tell you all about it, but Kellard won't say a word, and I'm not a specialist in his line, so . . ."

Kellard possessed a sharp, ratty voice. It squeaked away over Hayter's



lazy baritone at Murphy.

"I know nothing about the thing at all yet, Murphy. Just wait a moment and I'll show it to you. It's in the icebox."

HE straightened up from the microscope and pushed his glasses down from his forehead on to his nose. He squinted at Murphy across the bench.

"Don't know what this is at all. It had only been dead a minute or two when Bryant found it. Hayter, open the 'fridge doors will you?"

He continued speaking as Hayter obediently slid back the doors of the refrigerator, allowing cold air to blast icily across the dissecting room.

"I've photographed it from all angles and taken out most of the internal organs; couldn't do any other really as the beast was torn open. Heard Hayter telling you I think there's another of its kind around somewhere. The wounds could easily have been made with those claws..." He indicated the massive bony claws, grey-blue in colour, which lay folded across the beast's six smaller walking legs.

Murphy's gaze travelled over the whole body. Hayter had very neatly sewn up the original gash which had caused the beast's death. The three pairs of legs folded under the claws looked exceptionally like those of a dead insect, tense and rigid. The body itself was unremarkable; it was a tawny yellow colour, the skin similar to the pelt of a tiger, but stripeless. There was no sign of a tail. At the other end of the body, grotesquely curled back on itself, was the beast's long neck. It was fully the length of the body; Murphy on reflection decided that the living beast held its head rather high.

The head was beyond reasoning. Of course, sense organs needn't necessarily be in the head, but usually they were. The long tapering neck narrowed from the thickness of a small barrel where it left the body to the diameter

of a piece of thick rope. Then it widened into an egg-shaped tawny lump, marked with black excrescences which Murphy assumed to be the only external signs of sense organs.

He pointed to the lumps.

"Are they eyes, ears, or what?"

"Don't know," squeaked Kellard. "They might be either."

"I've seen nothing like it," observed Hayter.

"Yes. I want to know where it's come from. The records of the *Wanderer* describe nothing like this."

"Stowaway?" suggested the doctor.

"Impossible!" snapped Kellard. "Nothing that size could get up the gangplank without being spotted on any world. Besides . . ."

The buzz of the telephone cut him short. Kellard snatched the receiver off the stand.

"Kellard," he snapped into the microphone. There was a pause.

"Oh! It's for you." He handed the receiver to Murphy.

For a few moments Murphy listened to his caller, then murmured:

"I'd expected it," and hung up.

"Kellard, your other beast has become active. Doc," he turned towards Hayter, "come down to the airlock with me, will you. One of the men taking out the drive section has been attacked. He's in a bad state—very nervous."

"Sbock?"

"Presumably—put some pills in your case and come along; we'll see if he can tell us anything."

"Can I come?" asked Kellard eagerly.

The biologist's company was the last Murphy desired.

"I should carry on here. We'll need all the information we can get about this . . ." He waved his hand at the beast and the microscopes.

THE doctor picked up his first-aid bag from his cabin on the way to the airlock. There was a group of half a dozen cutters standing round the couch by the door; a man covered with an electric blanket lay on the emergency bed being fed nutrisol from a tube. The men silently made way for Murphy and Hayter.

"What happened?" asked Murphy.

"Don't really know, Mr. Murphy," said one of the men. "We just heard Carroll shout and scream, then everything went quiet. We found him on the deck and brought him in. We took his suit off and gave him nutrisol and he kept talking about claws. His suit's in a terrible state, dented round the chest . . ."

"Right. What do you think, Doc?"

"He's had a fright certainly; can't say much else at present."

Hayter felt beneath the blanket searching for the man's wrist. As his hand touched flesh the man jumped, screaming.

"It's a claw! A claw! Don't, I say . . ."

Hastily Hayter withdrew his hand and felt in his first-aid kit. The man screamed once more, breath souging out of his writhing body. Murphy could almost picture his struggles trying to escape from the beast.

The doctor carefully sterilised the needle of a hypodermic from his kit

and filled the barrel of the instrument. Thumb on plunger he waited until Carroll was still, then inserted the needle in his flesh. The man jerked, opening his mouth in a scream that never fully materialised, dying away as a gurgle in his throat before it was uttered.

After the patient had been removed to the sick bay Hayter and Murphy donned suits and jetted off from section One towards Three heading for the place where Carroll had been injured. Two other cutters were with them; all four trod gingerly across the steep curve of section Three, through the fantastic forest of twisted pipes and girders down to the pile room. Lights sprang from magnets attached to the floor and ceiling; in the mess of wires outside it had been impossible to trace the contacts which led to the pile room lighting circuit.

The four men stood in silence in the huge room, looking carefully about them. They saw nothing to indicate any struggle, nor did they see any signs of the beast. The lights, casting giant shadows across the installations, were dotted at odd intervals about the room; work had not properly started on the section yet.

"There could be a lot of things in here we can't see," crackled Hayter's voice harshly in Murphy's phones. "The shadows those lamps throw would hide a dozen things the size of the beast."

"Yes," answered Murphy. "Were either of you near Carroll when he was attacked?"

"We were round the corner," replied one of the men, "doing a double check for radioactivity. It seemed excessive . . ."

Murphy grunted and walked off across the deck, round behind the pile. He clapped magnetic gloves against the side of the power unit and climbed up the side. A solitary lamp gleamed at the top intensifying the surrounding darkness. Murphy pushed himself to his feet and walked slowly about the roof of the pile, the hindrance of the light behind him. Perpetual blackness enveloped him immediately; he looked away from the light, although at one point he could see a few distant stars through a fracture in the hull. Disgustedly he climbed down to his three waiting companions.

"Let's get back to One. There's nothing here."

MURPHY climbed out of the mass of twisted metal the last of the four. He stood for a few moments looking at the stars, wondering how the Mira expedition was faring; they should be back almost any time now. Expertly he picked out Mira from the surrounding stars, then shifted his gaze in quest for Jupiter. It was a good fifty million miles away at present; Murphy strained his eyes but failed to see the giant world, lost against the streak of the Milky Way. In a very short time it would overtake the wreck of the *Wanderer* and roll on into space.

"Murphy," crackled Hayter's voice in his headphones.

"Coming!" he replied, mind still on Jupiter. He removed his eyes from the Milky Way, searching the brilliant stars for his three companions. He found them, each a yellow dart of light, heading towards One, itself partly obscured by Two.

"I'm going to drop off at Two; back at One in ten minutes."

Expertly Murphy dived towards Two, cutting his jet as he alighted on the hull. His feet clicked across the deck until he came to the point where

Two and Three had broken apart. Stepping carefully over the torn metal he penetrated a little way down a corridor, looking for nothing in particular. He wanted to think. These beasts—where had they come from was the first question which entered his mind. He determined to get the log book from Kellard when he returned to the ship.

The passage narrowed, widened again, dividing into two tiny corridors which led—when the ship had been whole—to the refrigeration unit. Murphy called to mind the plan of the ship, took the left-hand passage and started working his way back. It would lead him out of Two on the opposite side of the fragment.

Stars shone brightly against the dark blue infinities of space as he turned a right-angled bend in the passage. The ship had upended herself and Murphy found himself looking at the Milky Way again. Swiftly he moved to the end of the corridor and jetted himself off into space, darting upwards towards One. The huge forepart of the ship covered an immense area of the firmament; lights glistened along its length and even from the two miles distance he was away he could see someone working in the navigation blister. As he approached One a couple of figures slipped out of the airlock, climbing away toward Three.

The phone buzzer rasped in his ear.

"Murphy . . . ?"

"Here."

"Milton speaking. We've had another casualty . . ."

"Who?"

"Hillier. He's dead; ripped open like the beast was . . ."

Murphy swiftly ran through his mind what he knew about Hillier. No relatives—had joined the company four years ago, took his leave regularly, spent all his money on Mars. Quiet, kept to himself.

"You said he was ripped open—through his suit?"

"Yes, he's . . ."

"Where's Kellard? I'm coming up towards One."

"Still in the dissecting room."

"I'm landing at the airlock now. Tell him I'm coming straight up to see him."

ANGRILY Murphy snapped off his phones and waited for the airlock doors to open. Phrases with which to lash Kellard tumbled through his mind as he endured the intolerably long wait before the second doors opened, but even as he mentally flayed the little biologist he knew there would be no effect from his words other than Kellard wouldn't speak to him for a few days. Murphy meant to have guards; already he had a plan beginning to form in his mind to cope with the emergency. The doors opened and Murphy clacked up the corridor, pulling off his helmet and tucking it under his arm as he stamped along to Milton's cubby hole.

"Any news?" he snapped.

"You know all there is."

"Does Kellard know about Hillier?"

"No. I . . ."

"Right."

Angrily Murphy stalked up the corridor, feeling as annoyed as he had

the time his sports boat had been stolen from under his nose on Diemos. That time he'd come out on top; now he doubted whether he could penetrate Kellard's inner consciousness. He rather anticipated Kellard would get the better of the coming argument. Noisily he wrenched open the sliding door. Kellard was standing by the gaping refrigerator probing at the entrails of the beast.

"Kellard!" snapped Murphy.

The ratty biologist turned round, knocking his glasses down to the bridge of his nose.

"Murphy—what—?"

"Your other beast has become too active. It's killed one of my men——"

"He should have been on the lookout. He knew there was danger around. If he wasn't informed it was your fault——"

"You admit it was dangerous? When I spoke to you last time you weren't so sure!"

Kellard frowned, laid down the scalpel with which he had been exploring the interior of the beast.

"I think I said the wounds which caused death could have been made by another of its own kind. I didn't say it was dangerous at all, although I think it is obvious."

Mentally Murphy noted his slip; he tried another tack.

"This means I shall have to slow down work until I can get guards from Diemos; that will mean increased cost of the operation."

That put Kellard's back up as well.

"Increase the cost as much as you like; we'll sue you then for breach of original contract . . ." The biologist picked up his scalpel and turned his back on Murphy. The salvage engineer sighed, realising his temper had caused exactly the situation he had hoped to avoid; Kellard was too involved in the beast to worry about outside occurrences.

"I'm sending 'grams to the Society and my company; they'll give the facts. I'm working the men at least in pairs from now on."

"My report will go in anyway in a couple of days time. We'll work on from there," replied Kellard coolly.

MURPHY saw there was no chance of getting anything else out of him for a time, nor was there at present the remotest hope of persuading him to part with the log. Murphy mentally kicked himself for letting temper get the upper hand over reason. Anyway, it was too late to worry now; he'd have to try the indirect method of approach through Hayter if he wanted to get his hands on the log. Idly he drifted back to his cabin to word the 'grams.

When he'd finished he read through the history once and shrugged. Neither party would like the facts; they showed Murphy himself to be partly in the wrong. Impulsively he scrapped the cables, re-worded them merely mentioning the beast and asking for more men. Perhaps Kellard would be a little more approachable when next he had to speak to him. Murphy himself was now ice cold; casually he turned his mind once more to the possible origin of the beast.

For a few moments wild speculations tumbled through his brain; the ship had visited the twelve worlds of Deneb, some stars en route, a couple of galactic curiosities—Haydon's Binary and Bennett's World—and refuelling

post A4 on the return journey. At the present moment Murphy could call no more halts to mind. He rang the switchboard and asked for Hayter to be sent along to his room as soon as possible.

How long the doctor would be he didn't know; he shifted to his desk and began working out his men in pairs for future work of dismantling. It would be difficult; one man would have to be on watch while his companion worked, but he realised there would be places where large working parties could be used with few guards.

Murphy felt something nagging away at the back of his mind. Something that had been said, or had occurred to him recently. He put down his stylo and looked at the stars out of the porthole for inspiration, calling on memory for what had passed through his head recently. He back-tracked swiftly over the worlds the ship had touched, a smile crossing his features when Haydon's Binary recurred.

The salient features of the system flickered through his mind. The world itself was slightly larger than Mercury; the companion world a trifle smaller than Luna, but a ball of intense radioactivity. There was no atmosphere on the larger world, but life that differed from generation to generation flourished amongst the immense reefs of growing crystals.

Not that knowledge of the beasts' origin helped at all but it did give a chance for some suggestions to be brought forward about how to deal with the situation. If Kellard's mind had worked on similar lines he should have reached a similar conclusion. Murphy's mind flitted to Hayter; he'd have known if there was any radioactivity present in the body.

The door slid back after a rap on the panel disclosing Hayter, helmetless but still wearing space armour.

"Hear you wanted me." He shook his head. "Hillier was a mess. Poor devil. Lack of air and pressure got him before the beast started work."

"You don't think he suffered."

Hayter shook his head.

"Don't think so; he looked rather baffled about the whole business. I'm going to take photographs of the eye retina; see what attacked him then—if it's the same sort of beast."

Hayter's thoughts were wandering along several tracks at once; Murphy cut off his speculations and intentions abruptly, explaining his notions about Haydon's Binary, and getting the log off Kellard. Hayter agreed with him in the main about Haydon's Binary but pointed out:

"Tramp worlds are characteristically radioactive and even if the beast came from Haydon's Binary it could have used up its radioactivity as food reserve. I'll admit though, it was more radioactive than it should have been for an animal from an ordinary world. Anyway, I'll get that log for you; I think Kellard'll part with it easily enough to me."

AFTER Hayter's departure Murphy's mind turned back to reorganising the work on the *Wanderer*, then almost immediately he decided to order a thorough search among the wreckage for signs of the other beast. With renewed energy he settled down to planning the operation.

It took comparatively little time to make preparations on paper for the search. When Murphy finished he looked at his watch, decided to call the men in, have a twelve-hour rest for everybody—no, not everybody; there'd

have to be guards on now against the beast, but just which portions should be protected he didn't quite know. But if all personnel were aboard One, with lights and gravity and airlocks they should be reasonably safe. Nonetheless Murphy noted a few names on his pad of men for guard during the coming rest period. He decided they'd better wander about the ship, armed of course, with orders that he was to be called if anything happened. He rang the switchboard, put his orders into operation and retired to bed.

Murphy himself led one of the parties of six men on a circular tour round the parts of the *Denebian Wanderer*. They scoured the three sections of the ship piece by piece, with minute attention the structure hadn't had in the two years since she set out for Deneb. Murphy's party went over the ship with a fine tooth comb; Murphy confident that the other parties did the same. They had their lives at stake for a start, and something Murphy admitted with pride and only to his closest friends, his was one team of salvage men which didn't take their pick of the goods. His men believed in the company as much as he did himself.

The hunt took the greater part of another twelve hours. Men floated through the caverns of the wrecked ship shining torches into dark corners, probing with extending arms at inaccessible spots amongst the torn metal of the hull. They found nothing which indicated the presence of the beast, leaving Murphy to confess himself beaten.

After a further twelve hours rest he ordered work to re-start on the reduced scale he had planned until it could be confirmed there was no further danger. How long that was likely to be he hated to think, but it should be no more than four days before the guards arrived from Diemos. In the intervening time—his mind balked at what might happen.

Before he retired Murphy sought out Hayter. The doctor was tired; he had led another party through the wreckage and the strain, combined with the work he had done previously on the beast, had begun to show in his dark features. He hadn't approached Kellard about the log book, nor had he done anything further about the beast. Murphy could see he was in no mood for discussion, so he left him after a few perfunctory questions and turned in, sleeping uneasily for the next six hours.

WORK advanced steadily after the twelve hour rest; there was no incident for a couple of days after the search, but nervous tension spread throughout the crew. It was easy to see they regarded the lack of action as a calm before the storm; their outlook could be summed up as: "The beast is going to get someone, and while it mightn't be me, it's just my luck."

Hayter advanced that viewpoint when he dropped in to see Murphy.

"It's not good for the nerves, all this tension," he murmured. "Especially out here where all there is to do is work. . ."

"What have you found out about the beast?" interrupted Murphy.

"Not a lot. The biggest consolation is that it doesn't appear to be intelligent at all; it's the sort that eats when it's hungry, but what it eats and how old it is Kellard can't be certain. That piece of stuff he thought was digestive tract was merely muscle, but it wasn't protoplasm by any stretch of the imagination, although it looked like it."

Hayter threw up his hands disgustedly.

"What we do know about the creature is that it can live in a vacuum

comfortably and that it has a thrust on its claws that will penetrate a suit."

"Hayter!" Murphy leapt out of his chair. "Monaghan will have the chart records of the ship during the last few days, won't he?"

Hayter nodded.

"An idea?"

"Yes. Let's get up to navigation. No, just a minute."

Murphy lifted the phone from the hook and spoke rapidly to Monaghan after dialling the blister number. As they hurried up the stairs to Monaghan, Murphy explained.

"I saw it quite suddenly when you said it could exist in a vacuum. It can live where there's no air, no water, nothing. Haydon's Binary has no warmth despite all the radioactivity, therefore it's possible the beast hates warmth, and you'll remember the cause of the ship breaking up?"

"Refrigeration failure—the units were overloaded . . ."

"Exactly—so where do you think the best place for the beast would be?" Murphy, excitement rising within him over his theory, answered his own question. "It would be on the part of the ship furthest from the sun, wouldn't it?" Murphy found himself looking anxiously at Hayter for his companion's approval. To his pleasure Hayter nodded.

"Seems reasonable. It would account for the fact we never caught up with the beast during the search. It was constantly in motion, and may have followed us round accidentally——" he paused. "That's a long chance, but I think it's possible."

Murphy felt renewed excitement arising in him.

"If we can check the movements of the ship with the times the men were attacked we could confirm that."

Monaghan raised his red head from examining the charts as Murphy slid open the door to the navigation blister. The navigator finished placing the little plastic cubes in sequence in the wire cage on the table, greeting Murphy and Hayter as he added the last brick to the framework.

"Time and distance charts are in the drawer below," he added, then proceeded to watch and listen with interest.

MURPHY dragged out navigation instruments and tables. Three times, scrap-pad in hand, he made calculations on the mechanical navigator, handing the final figures over to Hayter. Monaghan looked over the doctor's shoulder, then questioningly at Murphy.

"I think you're right, Murphy," said Hayter. "Kellard won't like this; he's too keen to find things out for himself," he grinned.

Monaghan reached out for the phone as it buzzed.

"Blister—Monaghan speaking."

The receiver crackled.

"Oh. Mr. Murphy . . ."

"Yes?"

"Sollan attacked on Three a few minutes ago. He's all right, though."

"On Three! Is that furthest from the sun at present?"

Monaghan looked at the pile of cubes on the table, mentally extending the blue, yellow and red lines indicating the passage of the parts of the ship through space.

"It is."

Murphy looked at Hayter, smiling.

"It doesn't seem to like warmth," agreed Hayter.

Murphy left the doctor in the blister talking to Monaghan. He felt, as he returned to his cabin, almost as if he was walking without gravity. When he came within the four walls, however, he realised all he could do was order an intense watch on the section of the ship furthest from the sun. Quite a large proportion of the time the beast might seek sanctuary on one of two parts of the ship—or it might shelter on the dark side of one of the pieces. Regretfully he decided his discovery was of little value, but for a short while it had given him a badly needed fillip.

Momentarily the four walls of the cabin cramped him. He walked down to the airlock to greet Sollan and congratulate him on his narrow escape, calling in at Milton's cubby hole to wait for Sollan.

"CALL for you from the Doc," greeted Milton. "He rang off just as you came up the corridor."

"Where is he?"

The operator dialled a number and indicated the second phone to Murphy; he sat down in the chair beside it.

"Hello, Hayter here." The doctor's voice, hollow over the lines, sounded rather tired.

"Murphy speaking. Look, doc, have you got that log yet?"

"Yes—it's in the secretary's room. I wanted to speak to you about something far more important."

"Yes?"

"The beast—remember I took photos of Hillier's retina—trying to find out if it was the same beast?"

"I do."

"Well, all the photo shows is stars."

"Hillier was attacked from the front . . ."

"Exactly. It means the beast can turn invisible under certain circumstances. That's how Hillier . . ."

"And maybe why we didn't see it on the search. It certainly complicates matters. Might have to suspend work unless we can equip everybody with a paint spray."

"Nearest sprays are on Diemos . . ."

Murphy felt the operator tapping his wrist. He looked enquiringly at the man. Milton pointed to the phone.

"Another call for you."

Bewildered Murphy looked at the two phones. He dropped the one connecting him with Hayter to his lap, taking the operator's instrument in his hand.

"Collier here," crackled the earpiece. "We've just discovered a beast. It's on the dark side of Two; when we found it the thing was still struggling; it's been carved about like the others."

Murphy groaned.

"That means there's at least another one somewhere about . . . bring it in, will you? I think Kellard'll be very pleased to have it. Now he's got two of the things it'll allow for mistakes. 'Bye Collier." He handed the phone back to Milton and picked up the one which connected him with Hayter.

"You there Doc? Look we've just found another of those things. This one was still struggling. Collier's crew found it on the dark side of Two a few minutes ago. They're bringing it in so if you can find Kellard I think you'd better tell him."

"He came in just now; I'll tell him."

MOODILY Murphy replaced the receiver and walked out of Milton's den, heading for his own room. He felt he needed a long sleep and was wondering whether he dare take a couple of tablets when Sollan bounced up to him.

"Hello, Mr. Murphy. Thought you might like to hear all about it."

Murphy smiled, pleased to have Sollan to talk with him. It would take his mind off things a little, especially if he could get the man talking about his trip to Arcturus in the *Rover IV*. However, Sollan stuck to the attack the beast had made on him.

"You know, Mr. Murphy," he said, "one moment that beast wasn't there and the next thing I saw was that big claw coming towards me. I beat the brute nicely though. I just turned around and switched on my jets. Then I floated back over the spot and there was no sign of it. It must move mighty quick for a big thing."

"Don't think you would see any sign of it. The latest idea is that it can become invisible on occasions. It might have been alongside you all the time."

"Funny you should say that. I thought when the claw came up to me the thing must have been invisible for me not to have seen it."

Sollan shook his head and left. Unhappily Murphy watched him slide the door shut behind him, his mind beginning to cover the ground again so far. At first there had seemed only the possibility of one beast; now after the lapse of considerable time there were two dead brutes in the dissecting room and another still at large. There might be more, but unless they could be seen or some trace of them discovered, just how he was going to cope with the situation eluded him.

It seemed as Hayter had suggested that the beasts could become invisible under certain circumstances. Just how and when were problems which also seemed unsolvable at present; possibly when Kellard got more information from his probings into the dead beasts he might be able to advance a theory.

Kellard, however, was inapproachable at present. Mentally Murphy kicked himself for being as stupid as to present Kellard with the identical situation he wished to avoid. In due course the biologist would forget all about it, but until then Murphy would have to rely on Hayter for information as to happenings in the dissecting room. Hayter of course wouldn't always be available; it was possible at some time he would have intense medical work on hand.

Murphy decided to offer the olive branch to Kellard; the offering could do no harm even if there were no results from the action. He lifted the phone, asking Milton for Kellard's number. Milton had some news—the Mira expedition had returned safely; he told Murphy while listening to the unanswered buzz of the phone at the other end. Murphy waited impatiently for a few moments, then gave Kellard up; he'd find him sooner or later.

HE HAD just settled himself comfortably in the chair, idly debating

whether or not to ask Hayter along for a chat when Kellard slid back the door. The biologist was clad in a spacesuit and had a helmet tucked under his left arm.

"Mind if I come in?" he squeaked.

"Not at all; I've just been chasing after you." Murphy told himself to be calm and tactful.

"I've been working on the beast—very interesting. Can't quite see how it works really. Looks as though it's a mineral eater—digests the rocks of its own world—like the Lart on Arcturus IV. Unusual . . ."

"Hayter and I think they might have slipped aboard during the ship's stay on Haydon's Binary."

"Possible—but they would seem therefore to have some control over their invisibility, and that would imply a fairly high order of intelligence."

"Not necessarily," Murphy disagreed. "In unknown circumstances, not necessarily danger, it might be able to control . . ."

"Yes, quite. It could sense inimical tendencies."

"The ship broke up because of refrigeration failure. Do you think the beasts caused that?"

"Very likely; they're not large. I suppose they could draw cold out of the system if they needed it." He shook his head. "Mysterious. I'll be glad to get back to Earth and have a decent lab. to work in. Hayter's good; helps me a lot, but I'm limited here . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Mira expedition has just come in to Earth," said Murphy.

"Oh—Mira?" Kellard's eyes twinkled behind his spectacles. "That means I must get this finished; they'll have reports and so on. How's the expedition?"

"Nothing concrete. Milton picked up the news on the System Broadcast not long ago. Just the fact they'd got back."

"Good. Murphy, I've got a theory about these beasts. Got to clear them up" quickly. I want to see about the Mira stuff; be a lot more interesting than this." He wrinkled his nose. "Salvage," he added in a disgusted tone of voice.

"Nothing wrong with salvage," replied Murphy, careful to conceal his rising temper.

"Not from your point of view. All I can do here is theoretical stuff, until these things came along. Rather glad . . ."

"I've had a man killed because of them," said Murphy icily.

"Yes, I know. They'll be cleared up shortly."

"Sooner the better," agreed Murphy. "What's the theory?"

Kellard shook his head. "Simple; I can't tell you where they've come from, but we'll have 'em in the bag before long."

"Them—how many more?"

"Three; I'm going looking for them now."

"Where?"

"Looking for them, repeated Kellard. "They're somewhere in the three sections."

Murphy had no chance to reply before Kellard closed the door behind him. For a few seconds he debated whether to follow him, but decided against it, contenting himself with a brief warning to Milton to keep his eye on Kellard's suit number on his board.

A CAREFUL study of parts of the log of the *Denebian Wanderer* was Murphy's next self-imposed task. Steadily he leafed through a copy of it in the one-time ship secretary's room. The *Wanderer* had been a smooth ship; the outward voyage without incident other than stops for refuelling. It was after stop A4 on the return journey the trouble had commenced. Since A4 was without life the beast must have lain dormant between Haydon's Binary and the first failure of the refrigeration. After that brief breakdown, which was taken in their stride by the crew, duly noted and forgotten, there was continual overheating with a consequently slowed passage. Another failure followed a severe period of overheating but no cause could be found. It was ascribed to "Leakage."

The same convenient term appeared another twice before the jump from hyperspace. Bearing in mind the failures the captain had ordered the crew to be suited for the jump back to the system. His foresight was rewarded, for although several men lost their lives, the number of casualties was far less than might have been had no precautions been taken.

Murphy pieced the story together, extracting the relevant details bit by bit during his search. He decided the beasts were responsible for wrecking the ship, but there was little use him searching farther. Kellard had the answer to the problem presumably, or else he wouldn't have gone off into the void alone. But if the beast got the upper hand . . .

Murphy jumped out of the secretary's comfortable chair and raced back to his own room. As he tumbled into his suit the phone buzzed. Anxiously Murphy grabbed the receiver.

"Hello . . ."

"Milton here. Your friend Kellard . . ."

"What's happened? Is he alive?"

"Yes. He's alive all right. Very proud of himself. Thinks he's killed one of the beasts. He was out on Three . . ." Murphy heaved a sigh of relief, mentally calculating that Three was farthest from the sun at present, "when the thing attacked him. He knew what to expect, he says, managed to get his back to it and fried it as he jetted off.

"Says his theory, whatever it was, is correct, and that he'll be in to see you as soon as he can get back . . ."

"I'll be at the airlock to meet him," cut in Murphy. "Milton—I don't like him, but if he got himself killed while I was in charge here, I hate to think what would happen to me."

"I agree with everything you say there. He pestered me about the Mira business before he went out of the lock."

LESS hastily Murphy finished tightening up his suit and walked along to the airlock. He sat down on the emergency couch to wait for Kellard, a section of his brain telling him that if Kellard had killed the beast there were only two more to go. His mind still baulked at five of the things walking calmly up the gangplank on Haydon's Binary, a world where everyone would be on the *qui vive*. They must have been invisible at the time.

As the doors opened Kellard bounced out, fiddling with the screws of his helmet. Excitedly he wrenched it off.

"I had the most amazing luck. Went along to Three—the things don't like warmth at all, you'll know . . ."

Murphy nodded, making no attempt to stop the biologist's rapid, almost unintelligible flow of words. Taking him by the arm he led him to his cabin.

"Think I killed the beast that attacked me. I felt something touch me, so I turned round and switched on the jet. Simple—I don't know why I didn't think of that . . ."

"Seems as though Hillier didn't have time. And you know Sellan was attacked?"

Kellard blinked myopically.

"No, I didn't. Glasses—where did I put them?" He looked short-sightedly about Murphy's cabin.

"You probably left them . . ."

"Doesn't really matter, I suppose . . ."

"You didn't stop to see if this beast of yours was dead, did you?" pressed Murphy, ignoring the biologist's discomfort.

"No. Why?"

"If it's dangerous anyway and now injured, things are going to be awkward."

For the first time Kellard seemed to think.

"That's so," he admitted. "Look, you've got your suit on. Let's go out to Three and see if we can find it. I know just where I tripped over the thing."

A few minutes later Murphy and Kellard, two yellow darts of fire against the stars, jetted out of One towards Three. Three was slowly moving in its orbit towards the sun; at present it and Two were about equal distances away.

Carefully Murphy floated down towards the surface of Three with Kellard well in advance of him. Without any pause for orientation Kellard led him down one of the gaping openings, the blue-white colour of the interior of the passage giving Murphy the clue to his location.

"We're getting down towards the main refrigeration plant."

"Yes. I think they made this their home," squeaked Kellard. "It was just here . . ." the biologist pointed to a pocked area on the walls, "that I blasted it with my jet."

The pair halted, twin circles of light from their headlamps slowly covering their immediate neighbourhood in the tunnel. Carefully they advanced step by step, covering every inch of ground with their lights before moving. Quite suddenly Murphy saw the beast, lying still in the blob of his lamp. His sharp intake of breath reached Kellard; he too, froze.

AS THEY watched the beast twitched, six legs wriggling frantically to push the heavy body upright. The pair of claws opened jerkily as the head rose from the metal plates, blindly waving to and fro, concentrating its movement on the source of light in Murphy's suit. He couldn't be sure but he thought he detected the outlines of the body waver, fading and thickening.

Murphy felt his companion's hand grab his metal-covered wrist. The contact forced life into him again.

"Kellard, turn round! Turn your jet on it again. . ."

Without waiting to see whether the biologist obeyed his instructions, Murphy wheeled as he spoke, switched his jet on at lowest power, feeling it push against his back. A steady stream of fire arc'd towards the beast.

"Kellard . . ."

"All right, thank . . ."

"Blast off—now!"

Simultaneously they switched jets to full power, streaking at a dangerous pace out into space.

"Notice anything different about that one?" asked Kellard.

"No—smaller, that's all . . ."

"That's right. It . . ."

What Murphy thought was light penetrated his mind at last.

"You mean the two large ones were the parents and they brought their family aboard when they came?"

"Not exactly . . ."

The sharp buzz of Milton's call cut Kellard short. Murphy lost the rest of his words as he switched over to Milton.

"Murphy . . ."

"Milton here. Can you see Two from where you are?"

Murphy risked a quick look over his shoulder.

"Yes—trouble?"

"Another of the beasts we think. Hayter spotted it; he's taken a couple of men to investigate. There's a mirage that looks like a rock formation growing out of the hull."

"I'm going over there; connect me with the Doc, will you?"

Quickly Murphy told Kellard to get behind him and follow, expertly switching back in time to hear Hayter announce himself in the phones.

"Hayter here. Something very interesting going on. Can't quite make it out. You know Haydon's Binary at all?"

"Photos . . ."

"This mirage looks like one of the crystal reefs."

"I'm turning round now; be over there with you shortly."

Murphy reconnected himself with Kellard, telling him briefly what Hayter had said. From then on he preserved steady silence, straining his eyes to catch the slightest sign of unusual activity aboard Two. Three flaring jets flashed out of the streak of the Milky Way for a second disappearing behind the bulk of Two. The distance to the ship narrowed gradually; it was bad chance the fragment was receding in its orbit from Murphy.

QUITE suddenly Murphy caught sight of the beginnings of the mirage. As the distance decreased details gradually became more clear. Mentally he agreed with Hayter's guess about Haydon's Binary; at no other place amongst the known worlds was there a formation quite like that. A pity he'd not had a chance to say a few more words to Hayter.

The crystals, tier upon irregular tier of them, grew like coral polyps finally forming huge reefs across the world, until for some unknown reason they collapsed, their structure disintegrating into a ridge of fine powder, an isotope of the original substance.

The reef which seemed to sprout out of the hull plates of Two Murphy couldn't place. He'd seen photos, stills, movies and tri-di's of both without having encountered this outcrop. He tried to remember where the *Wanderer* had landed on the world, but couldn't bring the exact location to mind. It was somewhere in the Northern hemisphere.

The reef grew larger as he caught up on the retreating section Two. Kellard's voice became audible as a whisper in the phones; the biologist's words were unintelligible and at a low level. Murphy guessed he was thinking aloud.

For a brief moment Murphy had removed his gaze from the growth on Two. When he looked at the ship again the scene which met his eyes had changed almost beyond recognition. To be sure, the crystals were still there, growing visibly, slowly, as they did on their own world, but they were becoming distorted out of shape. The growth rate of one section seemed accelerated, the ridge ballooning out into a caricature of the original reef. Abruptly the illusion of the bubble vanished, the reef returning to its normal state. Anxiously Murphy switched through to Milton.

"Has the Doc any idea what's going on down there?"

"No report from him for some minutes."

"I'm nearly there myself; should be within local range shortly."

Two filled most of space in front of Murphy. The illusion of the reef had vanished; as the ship revolved it had slipped out of his sight. His eyes travelled carefully across the whole surface, spotting an edge of the crystals spreading over the top corner of the hull; his approach had been too swift to keep it in sight, the brief chat with Milton distracting his attention from navigation. He rose up again, once more bringing the reef into full view.

FROM the height of half a mile it looked impressive; a long finger of growth, colourless in itself but taking on the colour of the ship's hull, seemed to spring from nowhere. Carefully Murphy located the approximate centre of the reef and made for the spot. He hung a hundred feet above it, Kellard a little behind him, obviously waiting for something to happen.

"Murphy, what do we do?"

"I don't know. You're the biologist."

Kellard seemed too numb to do other than accept the insult.

"Calling Hayter."

The doctor's voice came back faintly into Murphy's ears.

"I'm down in the storage bins on Two; I've just killed one of them with an explosive bullet . . ."

"Good. How can we get along to you?"

"Main corridor. Walk along it and hope for the best. The other beast is somewhere around, but I can't tell you where yet. Keep your lights as dim as possible; I think that's what they go for."

"Coming down then; expect us."

"When the reef swelled like that I suppose it was then the beast died," suggested Kellard.

"Possibly," agreed Murphy, turning down over the curve of the hull of Two, making for the fracture at the far end.

"I don't see why they want to make illusions, though," continued the biologist.

"Nor do I."

Kellard prattled on, some of his natural buoyancy returning. His words flitted through Murphy's mind without making much impression; he was too occupied with his search for the main corridor. The breaking of the ship at Two had occurred at the cross; the ribs were wrenched round in a strange forest of shapes, concealing openings and giving apparent entrances where there were none. Vainly Murphy strived to bring back a mental plan of the ship; in part he succeeded, landing amongst the broken metal to see if he could spot a locator diagram.

Kellard circled slowly over the spot where Murphy had edged amongst

the sharp tongues of metal. Murphy could see his jet moving like an angry yellow firefly through the tangle of twisted steel. Suddenly the biologist's jet stopped; simultaneously he shouted.

"Murphy, come out quickly. Hayter's got the other one!"

PUZZLEDLY Murphy abandoned his search for the diagram, clambering over the twisted spars and struts back into space, jetting off towards Kellard.

"How . . .?"

"Look, look!"

Murphy could tell from Kellard's voice that he was excited; his arm frantically jabbed at space. Murphy followed the line the biologist indicated, amazed to see two Hayters darting about above Two. One was the doctor himself; the other a shadow of him, a mirage like the reefs.

"Murphy," squealed Kellard, "I can see the way things are. I can prove . . ."

"Prove what?" snapped Murphy. "Get off back to One . . ."

"What . . .?"

"Get off back to One and radio Milton for men with guns to come out here as soon as possible; I want the local channel free to talk to Hayter."

Angrily Murphy watched Kellard zoom away towards One.

"Calling Hayter. What's happening?"

Hayter's voice, much stronger, called back.

"I can't quite tell you; the thing seems to have got me taped. It's chasing me; I've seen my own image twice . . . The thing keeps touching my suit."

"I'm coming up to you; try and distract its attention."

"Better hurry . . ."

Murphy steered his suit to the nearest of the two figures.

"Proves Kellard's theory as far as he told it to me. I've worked it out to the end."

"He didn't tell me about it; keep dodging and see if you can pass it over."

"I . . ." Murphy heard Hayter's sharp intake of breath. "It tapped my suit again then; I can't see it. Can't use the gun."

Hayter's voice sounded worried; briefly Murphy switched over to Milton's channel listening to Kellard telling the operator about the happenings on Two. Satisfied he called Hayter.

"What's happened to the two men you took out with you?"

"Down in the Main Corridor."

The two darting figures of Hayter moved jerkily across space, silvery suits shining as brilliantly as the distant stars. A third figure joined them.

"Murphy, there's a double of you . . ."

"I've seen it; where's the beast?"

"It tapped my shoulder just now." Hayter chuckled. "It's a queer feeling . . ."

Murphy shuddered.

"Stand still for a few moments if you can. I'll try and draw it away from you towards One; Kellard should have got the men on the way now."

"I'll draw it off towards One myself."

"No!" snapped Murphy. "You've got the gun; if it leaves off being invisible, shoot it."

Ice cold fingers ran down Murphy's spine. He felt himself drawing in a

breath and trying to suppress a scream as a heavy weight fastened itself on his chest, forcing him over backwards.

"Hayter, it's . . ."

"Coming. The mirages have vanished . . ."

A FEW more of Hayter's words penetrated to Murphy as he beat with metal clad fists and boots at the beast's heavy body pressed closely to him. He could feel no movement of the claws nor did he anticipate any at present. He took comfort that while in its present position it could do no damage. It would have to relax its tremendous hold—unless it was going to squeeze him to death. With renewed energy Murphy pounded harder at the beast; the flesh was resilient, giving easily under his blows. Obviously he had hurt no vital part. The six walking legs scabbled on the exterior of his suit; Murphy heard them as faint scratches. If the beast had other weapons than claws and tremendous strength, now was the time for it to use them.

Suddenly the weight on Murphy's chest withdrew. Hayter's face looked down into Murphy's; his hand touched Murphy's suit.

"It's me," he said.

"The beast . . ."

Hayter pointed to a spot in space about twenty feet below them, slowly growing darker. Gradually the outlines of the beast filled in, six legs folded peacefully under the yellow body, claws laid over them as if in prayer. The long neck coiled round itself once, supporting the head. Expertly Hayter fired an explosive bullet into the still body.

"What happened, though?"

"It got tired of playing; it's only a youngster."

"Only young! I should hate to have met the adults alive," murmured Murphy. "What happened, though—the theory, whatever it is?"

"I think they came aboard while invisible on Haydon's Binary. Maybe they sought refuge from some other beast; I don't know. Those mirages of the crystal reefs and so on were just protective devices to let the rest of their fellows know their location."

"They've no eyes," interposed Murphy.

"True, but those things in the head can obviously distinguish things on the visual scale, otherwise why invisibility, anyway?"

Feeling himself beaten on that point Murphy asked:

"Why the crystals?"

"Inherited memory is the only cause I can figure out . . . It's a vicious life. The way I see it is that the first beast killed was the male; the female killed her mate to provide food for the young which had been born on the voyage. So, you see, only two beasts came aboard—much more likely than five, you'll admit."

Murphy nodded agreement.

"When we found the second one," continued Hayter, "we deduced that it was a female, and furthermore had given birth recently to three cubs or whatever you care to call them. That's the third, I think . . ."

Hayter indicated the still body of the last beast.

"Then our men were attacked for food." Murphy shook his head. "It's queer something like this hasn't happened before . . ." He shuddered.

"And the youngsters," Murphy glanced at the beast beneath him, "killed the mother because they got hungry as well."—THE END

LIFE CYCLE

NO PLACE LIKE EARTH

By JOHN BRYNON

The decision was difficult—remain at peace on Mars, or migrate to Venus and rebuild Earth's last heritage. The outcome would be momentous.

(The sequel to "Time to Rest.")

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

ON THE left bank lay the ruins of a great city. According to the Martians it was called something like Thalkia. It was unlike any waterside city, unlike, indeed, any city that Bert had seen on Earth. There were no vestiges or signs of quays. Instead, half a dozen stone-paved roads, ramps with low walls ran from the land into the water. Looking over the side of the boat one could follow them down into the murky depths. From them Bert had deduced that the Great Ones who had built the city had employed some kind of amphibious craft, able to run from the canal into the market-places or wherever it was that the cargoes were needed. It was just another of those hints about the Great Ones that, put together, added up to practically nothing.

Several times Bert had stopped there, and made his way among the ruins. They told him little: he could not deduce even the size or nature of the Great Ones. Pale red sand had crept across much of the place. Out of it protruded pillars and walls of the darker red stone, and between them the corners of fallen blocks. Here and there great lintels, architecturally fantastic, and structurally impossible on Earth, still stood. It could be seen that the Great Ones had abhorred the straight line, delighted in the subtle curve, and had had a particular penchant for a gently swelled three-sided pillar. And, too, that there was nothing ephemeral in their building notions. Allowing for the different gravity, there was a massiveness which nothing on Earth, save possibly the Egyptian pyramids, had employed. It awed Bert quite a deal to be standing in the remains of the oldest structural work anyone had ever seen. The civilisation of Earth seemed by contrast like a quickly blown and burst bubble. He doubted whether Thalkia had looked much different at the time when men's ancestors were leaving the trees for the ground. Each time he had come away humbled by antiquity, and with the desire to dig there one day and find out more about the Great Ones.

Yet this time as his boat chugged past Thalkia he almost failed to notice the place. His arm was over the tiller, and he steered without thinking. The eyes under his battered hat's brim were not even conscious of what they saw.

MANY miles behind him, beside a smaller canal than this, stood a ruined tower that had changed from its obscure original purpose to become the home of a Martian family, and it was there that his mind was lingering. The family sustained itself on the produce of a few fields irrigated by the usual wheel beside the canal. It was to keep the wheel turning and to repair



such domestic objects as confounded the limited local talent that Bert had the family on his schedule of calls. Of seven Martian years (which would have been something over 13 Earth years had the disintegrated Earth survived as a measure of time) Bert had spent more than six wandering the canals in his boat, leading a tinker's life from which he returned occasionally to base at the Settlement to pick up metal, make a few pots, and collect such supplies as he could conveniently remove. The small farms and scarce villages on his route had become used to him, and to putting broken objects aside for him to mend when he called, and he had grown to know and to like the people who lived in them. At first, to his Earth-raised mind, they had been too quiet, and ineffective, and fragile-looking, so that like most of the Earthmen he had thought them decadent. But in time he began to see himself and the other Earthmen with something like Martian eyes—as neurotic, acquisitive, and with values which were sometimes suspect. He had begun to wonder whether "drive" was always the virtue he had been taught it was—whether it might not sometimes be the expression of instability or poor integration. Though that was not a thought one would mention to another Earthman.

"To us it seems," a Martian had once told him, "that a sense of guilt lies on each of you Earthmen. You all of you think that you ought to be better men, or bigger men, or at least different men in some way. We wonder why

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a whole race should have the inferiority complex which makes it base its virtues on the assumption of its own inadequacy. To us that seems strange."

It seemed strange to Bert, too, and not very palatable when put in that way, so that he had disputed it. Nevertheless, as time went by, he had found himself understanding Martian views better, and Earthmen's views less well.

It was disagreeable to realise, too, that the Martians mattered more now, for the Earthmen were finished. The 'drive' of the Earthmen, which was something superimposed upon the normal will to live, had brought them to the end. By accident, carelessness or irresponsibility it had torn the Earth into the millions of fragments which now circled the Sun as an inner asteroid belt. The few hundreds of men left stranded here and there were of no account any longer. It made little difference whether they died off from drink or illness, or waited for old age to take them. In less than thirty Martian years the last of them would have gone, and the brief disturbance of their incursion would gradually drop out of Martian memory, leaving no sign but some admixture in the Martian blood— Which brought Bert back to considering the family that lived in the ruined tower.

There, as in other places, he had been accustomed to tell tales to the children as he worked. He had been only half aware that they were growing up. Mars was a world so spent, so far into old age, that younger generations still growing up there seemed not only incongruous, but pointless to an extent where he scarcely admitted to himself that they were doing so. His last visit, however, had left no doubt about it, for the youngest daughter, Zaylo, whom he thought of as a little girl, had suddenly become transformed into a young woman. The realisation had disquieted him in a way that was quite new . . .

BERT had come to some sort of terms with the conditions thrust upon him. He was not interested in the few Martian girls who hung around the Settlement. Occasionally he came across one of the Earthmen who had settled down with a Martian girl. Sometimes it seemed a qualified success, more often it didn't. In the early days some such idea had tentatively entered his own head, but he had dismissed it, rather as he had dismissed the idea of an alcohol-soaked life in the Settlement. The indications were, he decided, that it did not work well.

Bert was not analytical in the matter. It had not occurred to him that the chief factor in a Martian marriage would be the temperament of the man concerned—his ability, or lack of it, to adapt. Nor had he looked closely at the motives of his decision. He was aware that he resisted something, but had anyone told him that in his heart he was sentimentally preserving a useless loyalty to a world and a race that had finished, he would not have believed it. If his informant had gone further, and told him that the Earth he revered was an idealistic, romantic conception with little likeness to the vanished Earth of reality, he would not have understood.

What he did understand was that the sight of Zaylo had somehow pulverised in a moment a philosophy which had hitherto been adequate enough, and that the placidity of his existence had been torn to shreds. In his mind he could hear the voice of Annika, Zaylo's mother, saying: "Life is not something which you can stop just because you don't like it." He did not

want to believe that. There had been a poet once who wrote:

*I am the Master of my Fate,
I am the Captain of my Soul.*

That was what Bert believed—or hoped.

Ever since the day when he had accepted the grim fact that he was stranded on Mars for the rest of his life he had steered his own course. He had shown the Greater Fate that it could not get him down, and he intended to go on showing it. Zaylo was a trap—a beautiful trap, like a fly-eating orchid. The sight of her and the sound of her voice had pierced through all his defences. He ached from the resulting wound. He knew perfectly well that if he were to stay near her he could no longer hold that Captaincy undisputed. He was jealous of her power to move him, angry with her for revealing to him the dry sawdust within his life. —And so he had run away . . .

He was now in the process of discovering the paradox that it takes a very strong mind to run away really efficiently, and that if the mind is that strong it probably doesn't run at all. Certainly he had been unsuccessful in his efforts to leave Zaylo behind. She stood between him and everything.

When his eyes were on the massive ruins of Thalkia, what he was seeing was Zaylo. Zaylo in a deep yellow skirt stencilled with a pattern in warm brown, with her hair held high on her head by three silver pins; the delicacy of her hands and arms, the unhidden beauty of her young breasts, the curve of her shoulder, her skin like copper woven into satin, dark eyes looking depthlessly back into his own, red lips trembling on a smile . . .

But he did not want to see Zaylo. Deliberately he banished her. "Those," he told himself aloud, "are the ruins of Tbalkia, one of the greatest cities of Mars. That means only five or six miles now to Farga's place. Take the waterway forty-five degrees right at the junction. Let's see. Farga . . ." He consulted his notebook to refresh his memory regarding Farga's family and household. Farga's son, Clinff, would be pretty well grown up now. A useful boy, more mechanically minded than . . . And then somehow he was thinking of Zaylo who was also pretty well grown up now. He was watching her moving with the grace of a young Diana on delicate feet that seemed to caress the ground, noticing the carriage of her head, the rhythm of her walk, the—

BERT shifted, and muttered. He brought a determined gaze to the water ahead. Yes, Clinff had a better mechanical sense than most of them. One might be able to teach him . . . It was queer how difficult it was for Martians to grasp the simplest mechanical principles. Take the lever. When he had tried to explain it to Zaylo there had been a delightfully earnest little furrow between her brows . . .

FARGA walked down to meet him as he ran the prow ashore on the shelving bank. The Martian was smiling and holding out his hand in welcome—it was a custom which he had picked up, and punctiliously observed with Earthmen. Bert had a first impression that he was slightly surprised by the visit, but in their greeting he forgot it. He slung a sack of belongings and tools over one shoulder. Farga laid hold of a smaller bag, but failed to lift it. Bert reached down one hand, and raised it easily. The Martian shook his head, with a smile.

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"On the moons of Jupiter I, too, would be a strong man," he observed.

"If I could go back to Earth now, I guess I'd be as weak as a kitten," Bert said.

"As a what?" inquired Farga.

"As a—*a bannikuk*," Bert amended.

Farga grinned broadly. "You—a *bannikuk*!" he said.

They ascended the bank and made their way through the fringe of clinking tinkerbells which crowned it.

Bert was glad, and a little surprised, to see that Farga's house was still standing. After Farga himself had built the walls of flat, uncemented stones, Bert had selected suitable roofing slabs from the Thalkian ruins and ferried them down. When he hoisted them into place he had doubted the strength of the walls to support them, but Farga had been satisfied, so they had left it. Even after years on Mars Bert still found his judgments of weight and strength fallacious; Farga was probably right, and the structure had no weather to contend with, only heat and cold.

The place was the ordinary pattern of Martian homestead. A few fields strung along the canal bank, a wheel to irrigate them, and the house—which was part shed and granary, and part human habitation. Meulo, Farga's wife, appeared in the doorway of the dwelling part as they approached. Other interested but much smaller faces showed at the mouths of burrows close to the house, then the *bannikuks* came scampering out, filled with their usual insatiable curiosity. They began to climb Bert's trousers the moment he stopped. He discouraged them gently.

The inside of the house was clean. The floor was paved with a jigsaw of flat stones. There was an immovable stone table, its top polished by use; a set of stools carved from soft rock. In one corner stood a simple loom—an object of some value for several parts of it were of wood—and in another was the bed with a mattress of dried, strawlike stalks. No one could say that Martians were sybaritic. On the table Meulo had set out a dish of what the Earthmen called *potapples*, for they looked like potatoes, and tasted, with the help of imagination, very slightly like apples.

Bert dropped his burdens and sat down. Four *bannikuks* immediately raced up the table sides to gather in an interested group immediately in front of him. Meulo shooed them off. Bert picked up a *potapple*, and bit into it.

"Things going well?" he inquired.

He knew what the answer would be. A farmer's living on Mars was sparse, but not hazardous. No vagaries of weather, few pests. Trouble usually arose through the few simple tools wearing out and breaking. Farga recited a brief list of minor calamities. Meulo added one or two more. Bert nodded.

"And Clifff?" he asked. "Where's he?"

Farga grinned. "You know what he is—interested in machines, almost like an Earthman. Nothing would hold him when he heard the news. He had to go off and see the ship for himself."

Bert stopped in mid-munch.

"Ship!" he repeated. "Ship on the canal?"

"No—no. The rocket-ship." Farga looked at him curiously. "Haven't you heard?"

"You mean they've got one to work again?" Bert asked.

FROM what he recalled of the dozen or so ships lying on the Settlement landing-ground it did not seem likely. The engineers had early reported that all the remaining fuel if pooled would leave little margin over one take-off and one landing—so no one had bothered. Perhaps someone had succeeded in making a satisfactory fuel. If so, they must have been mighty quick about it, for there had been no talk of any such thing when he had left the Settlement half a Martian year ago. And why try, anyway? There was no Earth to get back to. Then he recalled that during the first years there had been a number of rocket rumours which turned out to have nothing in them. The Martian grapevine wasn't any more reliable than other bush-telegraphs.

"When was this supposed to be?" he asked cautiously.

"Three days ago," Farga told him. "It passed south of here, quite low. Yatan who is a friend of Clinff's came and told him about it, and they went off together."

Bert considered. All but three of the ships at the Settlement had been stripped or broken up. The three had been kept intact because—well, someday, somehow there might be a use for them that nobody really believed in.

"Which ship was it? Did he see her name or number?"

"Yes, she was low enough. Yatan said it was a long name in Earth letters—yours, not Russian—and then A4."

Bert stared at him.

"I don't believe that. He must have made a mistake."

"I don't think so. He said it was different from all the ships at the Settlement. Shorter and wider. That is why Clinff and he have gone to see it."

Bert sat quite still, looking back at Farga without seeing him. His hand began to tremble. He did his best to control his excitement. A4 would, he knew, be one of the new atomic-drive ships—at least, they had been new thirteen Earth-years ago. There had been a few in more or less experimental service then. Everybody had said that in a few more years they would replace the liquid fuel ships entirely. But there had not been one of them among those stranded on Mars. Perhaps the boy had been right . . . What he had said about the shape would be true. Bert could remember how squat they had looked in pictures compared with the lines of normal space-ships. He got to his feet unsteadily.

"I must go to the Settlement. I must find out," he said, speaking as though to himself.

Meulo made as if to protest, but her husband stopped her with a movement of his hand. Bert did not notice either. His eyes seemed to be focussed on something far away. He started towards the door as if in a dream. Farga said:

"You're leaving your tools."

Bert looked round vaguely.

"My—? Oh, yes—yes."

Still without seeming to know what he did, he picked them up.

They watched him go, with the bannikuks scampering unnoticed round his feet. He trudged on, brushing through the tinkerbells, setting a thousand little leaves clinking and chiming as he passed, and disappeared over the rim of the bank. Presently came the familiar sound of his boat's engine, then it speeded up, greatly beyond its usual phut-phut. Farga put his arm round Meulo.

"I feel I ought not to have told him. What can there be for any of these Earthmen? Their world has gone. Nothing can bring it back to them," he murmured.

"Someone else would have told him," she said.

"Yes—but then I should not have had to be the one to see such loneliness suddenly in a man's face—and such empty hope," he told her.

WHEN the night made its sudden fall Bert switched on his light, and kept travelling. For the first time he wished that he had built his boat for more speed. On the third night he fell asleep at the tiller and grounded on the gradual bank with just enough impact to awaken himself to his need of proper sleep. On the fifth day he reached the Settlement.

In all that journey Zaylo troubled only his dreams. When he was awake his thoughts continually brought back pictures of Earth. —That was stupid, he knew. Wherever the rocket had come from, it certainly could not have come from the swarm of circling asteroids which now represented Earth. Yet the association of ideas was unavoidable. It was as if an old locked box in his mind had been opened, letting scenes and reminiscences spring out as the lid was raised. And he made no honest attempt to force them back.

For the last few miles he might have been upon an ocean. The body of water formed by the junction of several important canals, the curvature of Mars, and his own lowly position took him out of sight of land. But presently he was able to make out the slender spire of the useless radio mast dead ahead. An hour or so more, and he had driven the boat ashore at her usual berth. He jumped out, drove the grapple into the sand to hold her there, and strode off towards the Settlement.

THE moment he set foot inside the fence he was aware that the place felt different. On previous visits its spiritlessness had closed around him like a blanket that became a little thicker each time. But now that sensation was missing. The few men he saw on his way to the central clubhouse did not drift in the old way. They looked as if they had received an injection which made them walk with a purpose.

In the clubhouse bar-room the transformation was a little less complete. A number of the habitués sat at their usual tables, too alcohol-logged and sunk in cynicism to change much. When he had helped himself to a drink he looked round for someone who might be coherent and informative. A group of three talking earnestly at a table by the window caught his eye. He recognised the two bearded men as out-of-Settlement men like himself. He crossed the floor to join them. The man who was doing most of the talking was pale and sallow beside the others, but he had the more decisive manner. As Bert came up he was saying:

"You put your names down now, that's my advice. I'm willing to bet you get chosen for the first batch— You, too," he added, glancing round as Bert pulled up a chair. "We want men like you. Half of them here have gone rotten. They'd never pass any physical examination—or stand the change. I'll put your names up right now, if you like—with a priority mark to 'em. Then once the doc's looked you over, you'll be all set. How about it?"

The two agreed without hesitation. The man wrote down their names, and glanced interrogatively at Bert.

"I'm only just in. What's it all about?" Bert asked with an effect of calmness. He was rather pleased with the way he was managing to control the excitement thumping in his chest. "All I've heard is that a ship is said to have come in," he added.

"It's here now," said one of the bearded men.

"From Venus," added the other.

The pale man talked. The other two listened as eagerly as if all he said was fresh to them too. There was a gleam in their eyes and a look of purpose on their faces. Bert had not seen a look like that for a very long time.

"Ever been to Venus?" asked the pale man.

Bert shook his head.

"The trip here was my first," he said.

"There's a future on Venus. There's none here," the pale man told him. "Things are going ahead there. We'd have let you know that long ago, but for that static layer over the place that cuts the radio out."

He went on to explain that it had been clear from the time of the first landings there that Venus could be given a future.

"Here on Mars," he said, "conditions were far better than anyone had expected. The atmosphere was a great deal denser and higher in oxygen content than anyone had estimated, and the temperatures more tolerable. It had been thought that only lichens or similar low forms of life could exist. Well, we were wrong about that. All the same, it is pretty nearly finished here now—well on the way out. There are the useful deposits of minerals which for some reason the Great Ones never bothered to work, but that's about all. It had gone too far to be worth a serious attempt to colonise. As for the moons of Jupiter—well, anybody who's content to spend his whole life in a heated space-suit might live there, but no one else. But Venus was something different . . ."

IN A rather elementary manner he went on to explain why Venus was different. How the conditions on the younger planet could be considered as approximating roughly—very roughly—to those on Earth some millions of years ago. How the density of the atmosphere helped to offset the increased heat of the Sun so that, though the tropics were impossible, conditions at the poles were tolerable if not comfortable. How, in fact, it was possible to consider colonisation of limited areas.

"And we were still doing that—just thinking about it, that is. We had got as far as establishing an exploring and shipping base on the island of Melos not far from the northern pole, when we found out more or less by chance that the Slavs had sent out two loads of emigrants and actually established a colony on an island near the south pole."

"I never heard of that," Bert put in.

"You weren't meant to. The Slavs kept quiet about it. They were kind of pathologically prone to secrecy, anyway. We kept quiet because we didn't want a first-class international row on our hands. We'd have had to do something about it—and we knew that if we started we'd be in for some full-scale nastiness. The best thing we could do seemed to be to start our own colony, pronto.

"Well, the Slavs had the drop on us there. They'd done a bit of criminal transportation on simple, old-fashioned lines—the way we used to do our-

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selves. But nowadays we had to get recruits for it. That wasn't easy. Maybe you'll remember a lot of blarney on pioneer lines. Bands, flags, receptions and all that? A lot fell for it. But there had to be other incentives, too, and as decent conditions as we could manage when they got there. —And in that we did score over the Slavs. They'd just sent their lot out with as much equipment as they thought strictly necessary—and it's wonderful how little that can be in a tough, well-ordered state. But then, the Slavs are a tough people.

"Still, with all the start we could give 'em our first lot weren't stuck on the place—but they'd signed for a minimum of five Earth years, and a pension at the end of it. There were twenty-five families in that first lot. Another twenty-five families were in space on their way there when whatever it was that happened at home did happen."

BERT nodded. "I remember. They were due for take-off about a week after we left."

"They made it, too. Several other ships came in, as well. But a good many just vanished. They tell me that two ships that were on the Venus to Earth run managed to divert here. They hadn't a chance to turn back, of course. Deceleration and acceleration again would have left them with no fuel for landing. The most they could risk was expending some fuel on making the diversion."

"But that didn't apply to an atomic-drive ship. The *Rutherford A4* had left Venus two days before, and she did have the reserve of power necessary for a stop, start and land, so she got back—with not a lot to spare. As far as we know, the other atomic ships all bought it. A1 was smashed in a crash on Jupiter, you remember. A2, 3 and 5 are thought to have been on or near Earth when it happened."

"So you see our position was a lot different from yours here. We had about the same number of space-port personnel, but we didn't have a whole flock of miners and prospectors—just a few explorers, botanists, chemists, and the like. And we had a colony containing some fifty women, and nearly a hundred children. Also we had a planet with its best years yet to come. We've got something to work with and to work for. This time the human race has got hold of a planet where it really is in on the ground floor. But what we need right now is as many men as we can get to help us. We'd be getting along a lot faster if we had more to oversee the work."

"Oversee? What, one another?" said Bert.

"No. We've got the griffas working for us."

"I thought—"

"You thought griffas were only good for making fur-coats? That's what everyone thought. On account of the price the furs brought nobody bothered to get nearer to them than shooting range. But that's not so. They've got quite enough intelligence to do useful work, and they can be trained up to more tricky stuff when we've got the time. Of course, they're small, but there's any amount of them. The thing is they've got to be watched all the time. There has to be a man in charge—and there's our chief limitation."

"So what you're offering is a kind of foreman job?"

"That's about it—to begin with. But there's opportunity. It's a place

that's going to grow. One day it's going to grow mighty big, and have all that Earth ever had.

"Maybe the climate's not too good, but there are decent houses to live in, and already there's getting to be something that looks like civilisation. You'll be surprised. Here on Mars there's nothing to do but rot. So how about it?"

"You took a long time finding out you needed us," Bert said.

"No, we knew that all right from the start. Trouble was the getting to get here. That took time. Fuel. To fuel a rocket you've got to produce fuel on the big scale. It takes a lot of labour and time that we couldn't afford for the returns. Just building the plant was too expensive for us to think of. But when we ran across fissile material we could spare the time refining that to get the A4 into use. We want radioactive material anyway, so it became worth doing.

"Now we can take forty-five men this trip, picking the fittest first. You'll make it, easy. You've not let yourself go to seed like most. So how about putting your name down?"

"I'll think about it," Bert said.

All the other three stared at him.

"God almighty!" said the pale man. "A chance that's almost a miracle to get off this sandheap—and you'll *think* about it!"

"I was twenty-one when I came here," Bert said. "Now I'm thirty-four, Earth reckoning. You kind of grow into a place in that time. I'll let you know."

HE WALKED off, conscious of their eyes following him. Without noticing where he was going, he found himself back at the canal bank. He sat down there among the tinkerbells and stared across the water.

What he was seeing again was a ruined tower beside another canal. A life that went on there placidly, harmoniously. A group of people content to live simply, to enjoy what life offered without striving restlessly for some undefined end. People who were quite satisfied to be part of a process, who did not perpetually itch to master and control all around them. It was true that Mars was close to dying. But the whole solar system, the whole universe was in the process of dying. Was there really so much more virtue in battling for thousands of years to subdue a planet than in living for a few centuries in quiet content? What was it the Earthmen imagined they sought with all their strife, drive, and noise? Not one of them could tell you that ultimate purpose. For all one knew there was none, it might be just a nervous tic. All their boasts need not be more than the rationalisations of a dominating egoism imposed upon a kind of transcendent monkey inquisitiveness . . .

The Martians were not like that. They did not see themselves as arbiters, as men to be made gods. But simply as a part of life.

Some lines from a poem came into his mind. Whitman had been speaking of animals, but it seemed to Bert to apply very well to Martians:

*They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied—not one is demented with the mania
of owning things . . .*

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The image of Zaylo stepped into his thought's sight. About her like an aura was a sense of peace to soothe his mind and heart.

"Time to rest, Earthman," her mother had said.

But he had fled because to rest, to settle down, to make a home there seemed like a betrayal of all that the vanished Earth had taught him. The act of surrender to Mars at last, against which the voice inside him still protested: "I *am* the Captain of my Fate."

And now there was the chance to join others who thought that way. A pitiful few, but determined to rise again above the catastrophe which had all but finished them.

A vision of Earth as it had been replaced Zaylo in Bert's mind. Cities full of life, wide farmlands rich in crops, the music of great orchestras, the voices of crowds, the liners on the seas and the liners in the air. The world made fit for man by man—the glorious dream of the composite mind of man come true. None who were living now would ever see Earth's genius on its pinnacle again. But it *could* climb there in time. The spirit still was there. One day there would be re-created on Venus everything that had seemed lost with Earth—perhaps it would be a creation even more magnificent.

What he was being offered was a chance to help to raise civilisation again out of disaster. That, or to stay on in puny futility on Mars . . .

The image of Zaylo stood before him again, lovely, gentle, like balm for a bruised spirit, like heaven for a lonely soul . . .

But there beside her shimmered the spires and towers of new cities springing into Venusian skies, great ships cleaving Venusian seas, myriads of people laughing, loving, living, in a world that he had helped to build.

Bert groaned aloud.

The echo of a puritan ancestor said: "The hard way must be right; the easy way must be wrong."

The murmur of another mocked it: "The way of vanity must be wrong; the way of simplicity must be right."

No help there.

Bert sat staring into the water.

A sound came from the Settlement behind him. He did not hear it start. He was suddenly aware that men's voices were singing. Occasional drunken bawling was familiar, but men singing lustily, cheerfully, with hope in their hearts was a thing he had not heard for a very long time. He raised his head, listening:

*"Oh! There's lots of gold so I've been told
On the banks of the Sacramento . . ."*

It floated across the sands like an anthem. Shades of the forty-niners, ghosts of covered wagon trains crawling, crawling across prairies and deserts, over mountains, forging on against hardships and hunger. With not much gold at the end, perhaps—only an arid land. But a land which their sons would make to bloom like a garden there beside the Pacific . . .

Bert stood up. Decision poured into his blood like strong drink. He felt a glow of comradeship for the men who sang. He turned, squaring his shoulders. He carried himself like a man refreshed as he strode towards the Settlement again. Throwing back his head, he let it go with the rest:

*"Oh-h-h! There's lots of gold so I've been told
On the banks of the Sacramento . . ."*

BERT was gazing out of the window as the narrow-gauge electric train pulled away. The perpetual clouds which allowed never a glimpse of the sun, hung greyly over the landscape. The grasslike growth on the cleared ground looked pale, insipid, and scarcely green at all. The forest beyond rose like a woven wall of much the same ghostly tint. The details of the distance were blurred, of course, for it was raining—the way it did nine-tenths of the time on Venus.

On one side the line ran close to the landing-field. Hulks of space-ships lay about there like half-flensed whales. They had been gutted of all useful instruments and parts long ago, and huge slices had been cut from the sides of many to supply the need for hard metals. Only the small *Rutherford*, A4, stood intact and shipshape, ready to take off in a day or two on a second trip to Mars. Figures were still busy around her. It was reckoned that she would be able to make three trips during this conjunction, after that she would have to lay off for a while until the next.

Over on the far side of the landing field coils of black smoke poured from the metal mills and rolled away across country, sooting the pale trees.

Whatever else you might feel about it, you had to admit that a staggering amount of work had been put into the place in thirteen years.

Through the other windows which faced the inner side of the curve the line was taking one could see the houses of the Settlement dotted about. Here and there among them magnificent pennant-trees had been deliberately left standing. Their immensely long leaves rippled in the wind, writhing like Medusa's hair. Crowning the central rise of the Settlement stood the massive pallsades of the seraglio. The upper part of the stockaded wall bristled with down-pointing stakes, and above a top fringed with sharp spines an occasional roof ridge showed.

Bert's neighbour noticed the direction of his gaze.

"Pic in the sky," he observed, shortly. "Jam to-morrow."

Bert turned his head to look at him. He saw a man of middle height, perhaps ten years older than himself. As with all the Venusian colonists his skin was pale, and had a softened, flabby look.

"Meaning?" Bert inquired.

"Just that," said the man. "The old dangling carrot. You're one of the lot from Mars, aren't you?"

Bert admitted it. The man went on:

"And you think that one day they'll say: 'Okay, you've been a good boy!' and let you into that place?"

"I've been examined," Bert told him. "They've immunised me against everything anybody ever heard of, and they've given me a certificate which says I'm healthy and fit for parenthood."

"Sure, sure," said the man. "We've all got 'em. Don't mean a thing."

"But it certifies——"

"I know. ——And what'd you have done if it didn't certify? You'd have raised hell. Well, they don't want guys raising hell around here, so they give you one. S'easy."

"Oh," said Bert.

"Sure. And now they've given you a job so that you can show you're a good, reliable type. If they're satisfied with your work you'll be granted full citizen rights. That's fine. Only you'll find that they can't quite make up

their minds about you on this job—so they'll give you another, maybe one or two more before they do. And then, if you're very, very good and respectful you'll become a citizen—if you aren't, you can still go on trying to make the grade. Take it from me, it's a nice tidy kind of racket, pal."

"But if I do become a citizen?" asked Bert.

"If you do, they'll congratulate you. Pat you on the back. Tell you you're a swell guy, worthy to become one of the fathers of the new Venusian nation. The old carrot again, pal. Unfortunately, they'll say, unfortunately there isn't a wife available for you just at the moment. So you'll not be able to set up house in the scraglio for a little while. So sorry. But if you go on being a good boy—. So you do. After a while you get restive, and go to them again. They're sorry, but nothing doing just yet. In fact there's a bit of a list ahead of you. Trouble is boys took to the climate here better than girls. Very unfortunate just at present. But it'll be better later on. All you have to do is be patient—and go on being good—for a few years, and the balance will right itself. Then you'll be able to move into nice comfortable married quarters in the scraglio . . . You'll have a sweet little wife, become the father of a family, and a Founder of the State. Jam tomorrow, pal . . . If you should get sore, and tell 'em a few things, you lose your citizenship—like me. If you get to be a real nuisance around the place—well, you sort of disappear."

"You mean that all they tell you is phoney?" asked Bert.

"Phoney, pal? It stinks. Chris Davey took this place over the day after we heard about Earth cracking up. Since then he's let his buddies run it the way they like—so long as they produce the goods. The result is plenty of work for everyone—and no muscling in."

Bert looked out of the window again. The Settlement was behind them now. The cleared ground on either side of the line was planted with unfamiliar, almost colourless crops. Here and there parties of the little yard-high griffas toiled between the rows, with the rain dripping from their silver fur as they worked. Occasionally a man in a long waterproof coat and a shovel-shaped hat was to be seen striding from one group to another and inspecting progress. Another part of his uniform was a whip.

"Well, they've got some results to show," he said, looking back at the smudge from the metal mills, almost hidden now by rain and mist.

"Yes, they've got that," the man admitted. "That's the griffas mostly—the donkey-work, I mean. There's plenty of griffas—all you like to round up in the forests. Lucky for you and me."

"How?" asked Bert.

"On account of they need us to supervise. The griffas won't work without. So it's no good having unlimited griffas without men to look after them. That makes Chris Davey's buddies think twice before they wipe a man out. Take me. I'm what they call a subversive element—and I'd not be here now if they didn't need all of us they can get to look after the griffas. It was even worth bringing your lot from Mars."

"And what do the griffas get out of it?" Bert asked.

"The chance to live a little longer—if they work," said the man.

Bert made no comment on that. He sat looking out at the blanched landscape through the drizzling rain. Presently the train jerked itself aside on

to a loop in the single line, and settled down to wait for a bit. His neighbour offered him a roll of the curious local bread. Bert thanked him, and bit into it. For a time they champed in silence, then the man said:

"Not what you expected, eh? Well, it's not what any of us expected. Still, it's all we've got."

"Huh!" grunted Bert, non-committally.

HIS mind had been wandering very far away. He had been back in his old ramshackle boat idling along the canal. In his ears was the friendly chug of the engine mingled with the tinkerbells chimes. The thin, crisp air of Mars was in his lungs again. Beyond the bank red sands rolled on to low mountains in the distance. Somewhere ahead was a water-wheel that would surely be needing attention. Beside it a ruined tower of carved red stone. When he walked towards it the bannikuks would come bounding out of their holes, clinging and squeaking, and pestering him for nuts. In the doorway of the tower Zaylo would be standing in a bright coloured dress, the silver pins shining in her hair, her eyes serious, her lips slightly smiling . . .

"No," he added. "Not what I expected." He paused, then he added. "How did it get this way?"

"Well, the Administrator here was okay with authority behind him—but without it he was nothing. Chris Davey saw that right off, and moved fast. The only serious opposition came from Don Modland who wanted a democratic set-up. But Don disappeared quite soon, and that had a kind of discouraging effect all round. So Davey and his mob took over. They built the seraglio stockade for the safety of the women and children—they said. If you're one of Davey's mob, that's where you live. If you're not, you never see the inside of the place. You only think you may—one day.

"Maybe it is true what they say about the birth rate and the death rate in there. Likely it's not. There's no way of checking. The place is guarded. It'd be hard to get in—harder still to get out, alive. If you're one of Davey's mob you carry a gun—if you're not, you don't. The long and the short of it is that if the results are coming along Chris doesn't trouble how his buddies get them."

"He's made himself kind of—king of Venus?" Bert suggested.

"That's about it. This part of Venus, anyway. He's sitting pretty, with everything the way he wants it. The doggone thing is that whether you like it or not, he's making a job of it. He is building the place up—in his way.

"One of the things his buddies put out is that it's a race between us and the Slav lot down in the south. If they get ahead, and come beating through the tropics some way, it's going to be bad for us. So it's better for us to get ahead."

"And attack them, you mean?"

"That's the way of it—sometime, when we're ready."

A TRAIN came clattering past on the other loop. Small open trucks loaded with produce, others full of iron-ore, some travelling pens packed with silvery griffas, a couple of glass-windowed carriages on the end. Their own train started off again with a series of jolts. Bert continued to look out of the window. His companion's hand came down on his knee.

"Cheer up, son. We're still alive, anyway. That's more than you can say for most."

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"I was alive on Mars," said Bert.

"Then why did you come here?" asked the other.

Bert tried to explain it. He did his best to convey his vision of an Earth reborn. The other listened sympathetically, with a slightly wistful expression.

"I know. Like the Old Man said: '—a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal—'."

"Something like that," Bert agreed.

"Son," said the other man, "you were very young when you left Earth."

"I was twenty-one," said Bert.

"Twenty-one's still trailing clouds of glory—for all it thinks it knows. It was a grand thing the Old Man said, but have you ever thought how many empires had to grow up and be knocked out, or how many billions of poor guys had to die in slavery before a man could get up and say that?"

"I hadn't," Bert admitted. "But it *has* been said. So why can't this be a 'nation conceived in liberty'?"

"Well, I guess perhaps the Old Man didn't have quite the right phrase, maybe. You see, after a creature is conceived, it has to go through all the stages—kind of recapitulate its evolution before it can get born."

"That doesn't sound much like a subversive element talking," said Bert.

"You don't have to be in a hurry to be subversive. All you got to do is to say 'why?' when it ought to be 'yes'. If you keep on saying it you find yourself booked for another spell of managing griffas in the quarries, the way I am now."

"But there's no reason to go back to the primitive. What's been said and worked out is all there in the books—books that are here on Venus. What I've seen for myself and what you've told me goes against it all. The thing they've set up is something like an ancient slave-state. We all know there's a better way of life than that—so, for God's sake, what's happening? With all the knowledge from Earth behind them, and the chance to build a new Earth here, surely they aren't going to pour half history down the drain?"

The other man looked at him for some moments before he answered, then he said:

"Son, I guess you've got it kind of wrong. Building a new Earth is just what they are doing. What you're complaining about is that they've not started in building a new heaven."

Bert regarded him more closely.

"I don't get that. I can remember Earth, you know."

"Me too. The difference is, like I said, the clouds of glory. What did you do there?"

"I went to school, then to college, then to the School of Spacetraining."

"And me. I worked on buildings, in factories, in ships, on docks, in space-ports, on railroads. I bummed around quite a stretch. Do you reckon I got to know what Earth was like my way—or was your way better?"

Bert sat silent awhile, then he said:

"There were fine cities, happy people, music—and fine men, too."

"Ever seen an iceberg? The part you *do* see looks mighty pretty in the sunshine."

"There was enough to show the way a world might be, and ought to be."

"Sure, sure. We all know the way things ought to be. We all got our little heavens." He paused contemplatively. Looking at Bert again, he

added: "Maybe—one day. We *have* come quite a way in a few thousand years—but we've still got to grow up. Takes time, son, takes time."

"But here things are *wrong*. They're going back. They seem to have forgotten all the things we've learned. We have to go *on*, not back. Now the people on Mars—"

"Sure. Tell me about Mars, son. That's one place I never was."

BERT went on telling him about Mars. About the place itself, about the way the people, for all the simple poverty of their lives, seemed to enjoy life as a gift in itself, not as a means to something else, and were happy that way.

The little train rattled along. A dim line of hills ahead became visible through the drizzle, but Bert did not see them. His sight was all nostalgic. It showed red deserts set with placid canals, green patches about little homesteads. Somehow he found himself telling the stranger about Zaylo . . .

The stranger said nothing. Once or twice he made as if to ask a question, but let it go unspoken. Bert talked on, oblivious of the compassion in the listener's eyes.

They were almost at the end of the line before the other broke in on Bert's mood. He pointed out of the window at the hills now quite close. In places the green-grey vegetation on the slopes was scarred with the dark marks of workings.

"There's where we'll be doing our jobs," he said.

Presently the train jerked to a stop. Bert stood up, heavily and wearily. He collected his gear, and followed the other man into the drizzling rain. He felt bowed down by his load. His feet shuffled in a clumsy trudge. He wondered how long it was going to take his muscles to adapt to Venus. At present the place bore down as heavily upon his flesh as upon his spirit . . .

BERT stood on the lip of a small quarry, surveying the scene beneath him. Because, rather remarkably, it was not raining he had an extensive view. But because it was likely to resume raining at any moment he still wore the long waterproof coat that was practically a local uniform. Beneath it his feet showed in large boots that were clumsy, but did keep out the wet. At his waist was a belt supporting a machete and a sheath-knife on the left. His other instrument, a whip, with its twelve-foot lash carefully coiled, was thrust into the belt on his right hand side.

Looking down almost between his feet he could see his party of fifty griffas at work. They were loading ironstone into small trucks which they would presently push on to the slope which led down to the terminus of the line, and later wind up again. Beyond the sheds and tangle of trucklines at the terminus itself he could see the electrified line, flanked all the way by cleared and cultivated fields, stretching like a rather uncertain swathe cut to the horizon. To either side the natural Venusian forest grew untouched. Mostly it was a monotone of the pallid and, to unaccustomed eyes, unhealthy looking grey-green. There was a little relief here and there from the pink flush of the displeasing plant they called the mock-rose—it reminded Bert more of a spiky petalled dahlia which had been swollen to some eight feet in diameter. Even more scattered, but giving some relief were occasional streaks of true green, and blobs of slatey-blue. Pennant-trees reared their crests magnificently above the ruck with their ribbons streaming. Still

higher rose the feather-tops, swinging in great graceful arcs even in so light a wind. With the rippling fronds of the tree-ferns they helped to give the illusion that the whole plain was in undulating motion. Bert, pensively regarding the span from the mist-hidden sea in the east to the shadowy mountains in the west, loathed each acre of it individually and intensely.

The only things in sight he didn't loathe were the griffas. For them he had a mixture of pity and fellow-feeling. They were intelligent little creatures, but the general opinion was that they were dead lazy. As Bert saw it, that just showed narrow thinking. Laziness is a relative term to be measured against work. Nobody calls a flower or a tree lazy. The point was that a wild griffa never had any conception of work. When it was caught and shown work, it didn't like it. Why should it? The captives netted by a drive in the forest came in as sad-eyed, bewildered little figures, of whom a number went promptly into a decline and allowed themselves to die. The rest had no great will to survive. Life in captivity was very little better to them than no life at all. The only thing that made them work at all was the desire to avoid pain. They were intelligent enough to be taught quite complicated duties, but what no one had been able to instil into them was the sacred idea of duty itself. They could not be brought to the idea that it was something they owed to these human invaders of their planet. It was Bert's job to keep them working by the only effective method. He loathed that, too.

There was also the uneasy feeling that his position in Venusian society was not all that different from theirs . . .

HIS wandering thoughts were brought back by the sight of the foreman overseer climbing the path to the quarry. Bert descended to meet him.

The man gave him no greeting. He was dressed like Bert himself save for the sign of authority represented by the pistol on his belt. As he strode into the working it was plain that he was in a bad temper. His hard eyes looked Bert over with the full insolence of petty authority.

"Your lot's down on production. Way down. Why?" he demanded. But he did not seem to expect an answer. He glanced round, taking the place in at a sweep. "Look at 'em, by God! Your job here is to keep the little rats working, isn't it? Well, why in hell don't you do it?"

"They're working," said Bert, flatly.

"Working, hell!" said the overseer.

He drew his whip. The lash whistled. A female griffa screamed horribly, and dropped where she stood. Her two companions, linked by chains to her ankles, stood quivering, with fear and misery in their dark eyes. The rest, after a startled pause, began to work very much more actively. Bert's hand clenched. He looked down on the fallen griffa, watching the red blood well up and soak into the silver fur. He raised his eyes to find the overseer studying him.

"You don't like that," the man told him, showing his teeth.

"No," said Bert.

"You've gone soft. Building this place up is a man's job. When you've been here a bit you'll learn."

"I doubt it," said Bert.

"You'd better," the overseer said, unpleasantly.

"I didn't come here to help build a slave-state," Bert told him.

"No? You'd just like to start at the top—with none of the dirty work—wouldn't you? Well, it can't be done. You tell me one great nation or empire on Earth that didn't have this behind it at one stage?" He swung his whip with a crack like a rifle shot. "Well, tell me——?"

"It's *wrong*," said Bert, helplessly.

"You know a better way? Love and kindness, maybe?" the man said, jeering. "You've gone soft," he repeated.

"Maybe," Bert admitted. "But I still say that if there's no better way of building than driving these creatures crazy with pain and fear until they die—then it's not worth doing at all."

"Tchah! Where's your bible, Preacher? There's just one way to get the work that's got to be done, and this is it."

His whip whistled again. Another little griffa screamed, and another.

Bert hesitated a second. Then he drew his own whip. The lash sang through the air and wrapped itself around the overseer's neck. At that moment Bert yanked on the handle with all his strength. The man lurched towards him, tripped on a chunk of ironstone, and came down on his head. Bert dropped the whip, and dived to stop him drawing his pistol.

His leap was superfluous. The overseer was not in a condition where he would be able to use a pistol—or a whip—any more.

THE griffas had stopped work, and stood staring as Bert got up and fixed the holstered pistol to his own belt. He raised his eyes from the man on the ground and stared back at them. He turned and went towards the toolshed. There he took down the long-handled pincers that were customarily used to cut a dead griffa free from his fellows. Then he went back to them, and got to work.

When it was over they still stood round puzzled, with dark, sorrowful eyes blinking at him from silver-furred faces.

"Go on, you mugs! Beat it! Sboo!" said Bert.

He watched them scuttle away and disappear into the dense growth above the quarry, and then turned to reconsider the fallen man. The overseer was heavily built. It was laborious to Bert's still unaccustomed muscles to drag him out of the quarry, but he managed it. A short way down the path he paused a little to recover his breath. Then, with a great effort, he lifted the body, and heaved it into a mock-rose. The petal-like tendrils received the weight with a slow, engulfing movement like the yielding of a feather-bed. The large outer leaves began to close. Presently the thing was a hard tight ball looking like an enormous, etiolated brussels sprout.

Bert sat down on a stone for ten minutes, regaining his strength, and thinking carefully. Then he stood up, with decision. But before he left he went back into the quarry to fetch his hat, for it had started to rain again.

ONCE THE acceleration was over, Bert emerged from his hiding place and mingled with the rest. A full hour passed before someone tapped him on the shoulder and inquired:

"Say, what the hell are you doing here?"

The Captain and the Chief Officer regarded him uncertainly as he was brought before them. The pistol he wore was almost a badge of rank in itself.

"What's the trouble?" Bert inquired, blandly.

"You're not listed. How did you get here?" the Chief Officer inquired. Bert looked surprised.

"Not listed? Somebody must have slipped up. They only put me on this job yesterday. But they said you'd been informed already, Captain."

"Well, I hadn't. And what is 'this job'?"

"It's—er—well, kind of recruiting-sergeant. You see I can speak four Martian dialects, and get along in several more."

"Recruiting Martians, you mean?"

"That's the idea. Spin 'em the yarn, and bring 'em along. They'll be useful managing griffas if nothing else."

He looked steadily back at the Captain as he spoke, hoping that it would not occur to him that a Martian transferred to Venus would only be able to crawl about, if he weren't actually pinned flat by the gravitation. It did not. Probably the man had never even seen a Martian. He merely frowned.

"I should have been informed," he said, stiffly.

"Bad staff work somewhere," Bert agreed. "But you could get radio confirmation," he suggested.

"Do you *know* anything of radio conditions on Venus?" inquired the Chief Officer shortly.

"No, but on Mars we——"

"Maybe, but Mars isn't Venus. Well, since you are here, you'd better make yourself useful on the trip."

"Aye, aye, sir," agreed Bert, briskly.

BY THE look of it no one had touched the old boat since he had moored her. Bert patted the engine, and then primed it. A pull-up or two, and she started. He laughed aloud. The old phut-phut-phut was like music to set his feet dancing. He cast off. In the old seat, with his arm over the tiller, he chugged out on the great canal.

Beyond the junction, and on a smaller canal, he stopped. From a locker in the cabin he produced old, patched clothes and a pair of the crude shoes that he was accustomed to make for himself. Overboard went the clothes they had given him on Venus, and the heavy, laced boots with them. He hesitated over the pistol, and then threw it after them—nobody used or needed such a thing on Mars. He felt lighter as he watched them sink. The miseries of the last few weeks on Venus, the long journey back from the quarries to the Settlement when he dared to move his weary body only by night for fear of being seen, the long wait in hiding close to the landing ground, the keeping alive on shoots and roots, the perpetual wet misery of the rain which scarcely ever let up, the anxious waiting for the return of the *Rutherford A4*, the delay while she was being made ready for her third and last trip of the conjunction, and, finally, the nervous business of smuggling himself aboard—all these began to become a bad dream.

He hitched his trousers, and tied them with a piece of cord. He was bending over the engine to restart it when the sound of a sudden thunder came rolling across the desert.

Bert looked back.

Above the horizon a plume of black smoke rose and expanded. He nodded in a satisfied way. The *Rutherford A4* would not be taking part in any more slaving expeditions.

He whistled gently to himself as he coaxed the engine into action again.

IT WAS the mind's eye picture come to life—even to the squeak pitched above the tinkerbell chimes telling that the waterwheel needed attention. As he walked towards the broken tower there was the familiar thump-thump of Annika, Zaylo's mother, at her work of pounding grain. The bannikuks scampered up, pestering—only this time he had no nuts for them, and they wouldn't seem to understand that. Annika rested her stone pestle as he approached.

"Hullo, Earthman," she said. Her eyes searched his face keenly. "You have been ill?" she added.

Bert shook his head, and sat down on a stone bench.

"I've been thinking," he said. "Remember last time I was here you said that if Earth was re-created now it would be stranger to me than Mars?"

"So it would, Earthman."

"But I didn't believe you."

"Well——?"

"I think I see what you meant now." He paused. "Back home," he went on, "we used to talk about men and women we called saints—the funny thing about them was that they never seemed very real. You see, once they were dead, people agreed only to remember the good things about them. Seems to me—well, it might be there never was a place like the Earth I remembered . . ."

Annika nodded.

"A heaven behind you is no good," she said. "A heaven ahead is better. But to make a heaven around you is best."

"You understand things, Annika. I was like a rich man who had been cheated out of all his money—the only worthwhile thing seemed to be to get it all back."

"And now——?" asked Annika.

"Now, I've stopped fooling myself. I don't want it. I've stopped crying for the moon—or the Earth. I'll be content to live and enjoy living. So this time——" He broke off.

Zaylo, coming out of the door in the tower base, had paused there at the sight of him. She stood quite still for a moment, poised with the grace of a young goddess. The coils of her dark hair shone like lacquer, her misted copper skin glowed in the sunlight. She put her hand to her breast, her eyes sparkled with sudden pleasure, her lips parted . . .

Zaylo was not quite as he had pictured her. She was ten times more wonderful than anything memory could contrive.

"So this time," Bert repeated. "This time I have come to stay."

THE END



NO PLACE LIKE EARTH

BALANCE

By JOHN CHRISTOPHER

*Technology was nicely departmentalised; the status quo evenly balanced.
Only a superior intellect could tip the scales.*

Illustrated by HUNTER

LUIGI said: "Signor I"

Max Larkin opened his eyes, for the thousandth time surprised and grateful for the dazzling brilliance of sunshine. His hammock, slung between two inward pressing olive trees, was no more than three feet from the sharp edge of cliff that marked his garden's end. Below the cliff Castellammare was a scatter of white and green—the white of sun-bleached stone and the green of orange groves—dropping down in terrace after terrace. The green was thick round the outskirts but yielded more and more to the density of the town; and beyond both green and white lay the enamelled blue of the Bay of Naples. Larkin turned round. Luigi stood deferentially behind him.

Max said: "Well?"

"Someone to see you, Signor Larkin. It appears to be urgent. Will you come in or shall I send him out?"

Beyond Luigi the small avenue of cypress trees ran back to the villa, a matter of perhaps a hundred yards. Max could see the leather-coated figure approaching. He said to Luigi:

"Too late. He's here. All right, Luigi. You can bring some wine out. The Nobile '89, I think."

The visitor was quite a young man; he looked unpleasantly warm in the leather jacket tagged with United Chemicals braid and badges, but at his age, Max guessed, the consciousness of his rank would naturally weigh more heavily than mere comfort. He motioned to a chair in the shade of the olive tree and sat back again himself on his hammock.

THE visitor said: "Manager Larkin?"

Max nodded. "I was. I've retired now. I don't use the title. Anything I can do for you?"

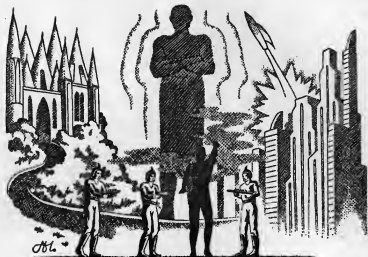
"My name's Mellin. Hans Mellin. I've come from Director Hewison." He looked at Max reproachfully. "Director Hewison couldn't get you on vidiphone."

Max said: "No. That's not surprising. I had it disconnected. The only business I have to conduct now is collecting my pension and I can see to that by the old-fashioned method of writing letters."

Mellin said: "So he sent me down to collect you. He wants your advice on something."

Max said carefully: "Where is Hewison? If it means crossing the Atlantic . . ."

Mellin looked hurt. "He's at his place in Austria. I can drop you there in three hours. I've got the gyro round the front."



Max smiled. "I'll go by train. Just give me directions for getting there. They can have a car to meet me at the station."

Mellin said: "But the Director wanted you to come up with me by gyro!"

Max said: "You may know that I did eighteen years on Venus. I would probably still be there if my body hadn't had the good sense to contract swamp-fever and so given me no option but to retire. Anyway, now that I'm back, I'm back. Between the earth and me there will never again be more than eighteen inches." He glanced thoughtfully at the hammock. "Well—thirty-six. You run back by gyro and tell Hewison I'll be coming. What station did you say?"

With some bewilderment Mellin said: "Graz."

"Right!" Max said briskly. "Tell Hewison I can be met there. I'll take the eight o'clock Vienna Flyer from Naples."

"Huh?" Mellin's brow cleared. "Ah—the twenty hundred!"

"Yes," Max said. "The eight o'clock. Oh, the wine's here. Put it down, Luigi. You'll join me?"

Mellin looked at the tray.

"Well, no. I've got to be getting back. But if you could put some in a bottle for me I'll take a nip on the way."

Max lay back in his hammock.

"Give Official Mellin a bottle of wine, Luigi. I think last year's vintage would best suit his—ah—palate."

MAX had a sleeper to himself on the Vienna Flyer. It was only here, in the southern half of Europe, that railways had survived at all. Transport and Communications kept them going for the tourist traffic but even that was getting slacker. It was just turned eleven the following morning when he got out at Graz. The car that awaited him was a huge, mother-of-pearl

inlaid affair with the Director's scarlet flag on the bonnet. They pulled away from Graz into the hills, effortlessly and almost silently.

Hewison's Austrian place became visible quite a few miles off—the driver pointed it out. It crowned a hill at the valley's head. As the road made its winding and twisting approach to it more details became apparent. They were all more or less disreputable. Hewison had had this castle built, Max remembered suddenly, no more than five or six years earlier. It was an outrageously grotesque marriage of Gothic and Twenty-first Century. Towers beetled at every corner and in between them shot up graceless pylons of naked aluminium. For miles around there was only one spot where the landscape was not irretrievably defiled—and that was inside the castle's own walls. Max sighed with relief as the car passed beneath the drawbridge.

The room he was shown to was in one of the pylons. He unpacked some of his things, left them to confirm a swift deduction that the Sheraton suite was an ingenious fake, and was congratulating himself on his perspicuity when he was called to lunch. For some weird reason the vast dining-hall was done in under-sea green—the long, jade-topped table was surrounded by squat pillars of translucent emerald, inset with replicas of tropical fish. It was made more overpowering by the fact that he and Hewison were the only diners.

The food was good. Max was rather surprised to find that the main dish was Venusian swamp-pig. On Earth, of course, it cost fifty European dollars a pound and was prized accordingly, but Hewison knew well enough that it was no rare luxury for a retired Venus Official. Unless . . . Max looked at his host more keenly. Could it be Hewison's thick-headed way of evoking nostalgia? Hewison looked back at him blandly and helped himself to more.

After lunch Hewison led the way into the library for coffee. "Olde Englishe," this, with oil paintings of hunting scenes and still lifes that looked bad enough to be genuine. Hewison produced some excellent cigars and rather less excellent brandy. He had still said nothing as to the purpose of Max's summons.

"HOW do you like the place?" Hewison asked.

Max nodded non-committally. "Very impressive."

Hewison said: "I like it here. I like this library. I think I'll have libraries installed in my other places. I've even been reading books lately. Some very interesting things. There's a fellow called—let me see—" He wandered over to the shelves and came back clutching a book. "—Korzybski. Something called General Semantics." He looked at Max piercingly. "You ever studied it? Says the whole nature of human thought is wrong. It's—it's *thalamic*! Man's got to learn to act entirely by cortex reasoning—he's got to learn to integrate."

Max got up. He walked across and stood beside Hewison who was pawing through the book, presumably looking for a quotation. He began to speak very gently.

"Director Hewison, I did not come here from Castellemmare for a little talk about the opinions of Korzybski or any other third-rate Twentieth Century nominalist philosopher. I've earned my retirement and I'm enjoying it. If that swamp pig at lunch was a prelude to asking me to do another job on Venus for you I'm afraid it was a waste. Because the Medical Board

won't let me back there even if I wanted to go. And I'm quite happy where I am." His voice rose slightly. "So if you've nothing else of importance to discuss I'll catch the evening train back."

Hewison looked at him silently a moment and then chuckled, putting the Korzybski down on a small walnut table.

"Well," he said, "let's get down to business then. I don't want you back on Venus—I know all about your medical report. The little job I want you to do for me will keep you right here on this planet."

Max said defensively: "I am pensioned, you know. I don't need to do anything but sit in the sun."

Hewison said: "I'll explain things. First, the political set-up."

"Spare me that."

"This is how it is," Hewison went on. "Thanks to you, Atomics took a nasty beating over their little attempt to stir trouble out of the murky waters of Venus. They're sitting quiet. I don't doubt they're hatching something but we're not very worried about them just now."

"Who are you worried about?" Max asked.

Hewison said: "Genetics Division. I'll have to go back a bit. Twenty years. Remember de Passy?"

MAX nodded. He remembered de Passy all right. He had been Genetics Division's star genius. TV had been full of him the year Max himself had been taking his U.C. Finals. His work on germ plasma had been revolutionary. And then, when he was only thirty-four . . .

"Gyro crash, wasn't it?" he asked. "In—Dorset?"

"Hampshire," Hewison corrected. "Very sad." He looked up suddenly at Max. "But unfortunately necessary."

Max said: "You mean U.C. murdered him?"

Hewison played with his rotor-pen.

"Two or three companies were represented," he said. "You see—we had to do something about him. Fortunately he worked with only one assistant who—died at the same time. De Passy was on to something very big; the artificial creation of super-geniuses."

Max said drily: "That seems the best excuse in the world for murdering him."

Hewison looked weary and strangely old. How old was he? No more than eighty, certainly. Hewison said:

"Yes. The best reason, the best excuse. Have you thought what super genius might be? Consider the ordinary genius as we have known him in the past; consider how *one-sided* his gift has invariably been. Newton the mathematician—and Newton the theologian, strenuously working out the size of the seventh horn of the Beast of Revelations. Einstein the mathematician—and Einstein the well-meaning but completely naive social scientist. Outside his own narrow field the genius is on level or even inferior terms to the rest of humanity. That is the way it always has been."

Hewison got up and walked restlessly up and down the fine Axminster carpet.

"You don't need telling that this is the managerial world," he said. "And you know how the balance of power is kept—each Company holding its own authority, conducting its own research, co-operating as a free and independent

agent with all the other Companies. United Chemicals, Genetics Division, Transport and Communications, Atomics, Hydroponics . . . and the rest. Now imagine one Company with the services of a man capable of super-human brilliance not in one field of research but in all. Ever since 1900 scientists have been forced to specialise more and more, continually giving up width of approach for the increasingly necessary depth. But imagine someone who could take it all in—the entire field of Genetics, plus the field of molecular and atomic chemistry, plus sub-atomic physics, plus every other branch of science you care to name. With such a man—such a super-man—working for any one Company, balance of power becomes an idle dream. If Genetics had him, Genetics would be supreme. Whether he realised the implications or not, that was what de Passy was after. And that . . .”

HEWISON paused. Max finished for him:

“So that is why his gyro suddenly, inexplicably failed, at a height of, if I remember rightly, four thousand feet. I see. Well you did it. You didn’t bring me up here to get it off your conscience?”

Hewison said: “We thought we’d finished the job. We smashed his lab pretty thoroughly. But we may have overlooked something. You see, de Passy was married. It never occurred to us that he might have—experimented on his wife. Even when she died six months later in child birth, it never occurred to us. Lately, however . . . There have been rumours. We can’t tell what reliance can be placed in them. Genetics Propaganda are quite capable of spreading things abroad that might be useful to them in future bargaining. And they know where to plant rumours so that we shall be certain to pick them up. But true or false the rumours say that de Passy’s wife had a child—and that child is the first, the only one of de Passy’s super-geniuses.”

Max sat back. He said:

“What about Contact Section? It’s their job, isn’t it?”

Hewison said patiently: “It would be normally. But unfortunately we’ve been working in close alliance with Genetics during the past ten years—mainly against Atomics. I always wanted to hold some of our agents in reserve for this sort of eventuality but I was over-ruled. They were too scared of Atomics. Now there isn’t a man capable of handling the job who isn’t better known at Genetics than he is at home. You, Larkin, are the one possible ace up our sleeve.”

Max said: “And what am I supposed to do? Suddenly develop a passionate interest in chromosomes and ask Genetics to take me on as a lab. boy?”

Hewison came and stood in front of him.

“Does the name ‘Linstein’ convey anything to you? He was in your college class; you knew each other fairly well. He retired from Genetics a few months ago. He’s your line.”

Max said: “And he isn’t going to be suspicious at my sudden desire to renew his acquaintance?”

“No. Because he is going to approach you. He’s a philatelist. A special exhibition of rare stamps is going to be arranged for Naples in two weeks’ time. His hotel reservation is going to be unfortunately mislaid. And at the right moment he will be given your name and address.”

OTTO LINSTEIN had been small and talkative with a career in front of him. Now, in retirement, he was still small and more garrulous than ever but there was a note of disillusion in his rambling talk. At any rate the fears Max had had that it might be difficult to keep at his tail without attracting suspicion were swiftly proved groundless. Linstein, like most men with a grievance, wanted friends and had none. Without any urging he converted his over-night stay at Max's villa into a further week, and a week after that, and another week. When at last he tired of Italy he insisted on returning the hospitality he had enjoyed. He and Max sailed from Naples, docked at Southampton three days later, and that evening were ensconced in Linstein's pent-house apartment.

The first three weeks had proved entirely unprofitable. Linstein talked quite a lot about Genetics but only once did he throw something out that might have been a pointer. It happened on the second day of their renewed acquaintance. Flushed by a good Orvieto wine Linstein had raised a vaguely threatening toast "to the future of Genetics Division." Scrupulous not to excite suspicion at so early a stage Max had refrained from following it up. And since then there had been nothing. Nothing that is, but perfectly ordinary revelations of staff politics; all of which, it seemed, had been designed to the sole end of frustrating Linstein's work and promotion.

Now, in London, Max was dragged at his heels with an ever-deepening suspicion that the whole thing was a huge wild goose chase, a mad idea of Hewison's without any basis in reality. But he recognised the impossibility, from his point of view, of being any the less thorough for that reason. A dozen times he started small hares that might lead Linstein towards the fatal indiscretion. And a dozen times, apparently quite unconscious of the intent, Linstein diverted them to harmless holes. At last Max resorted to crudity. After dinner, one evening in the second week of his stay with Linstein, he doctored his host's brandy with Vita, the pale, tasteless, paralytically intoxicating concoction brewed by Old Kajan in the swamps of Long Province, Venus.

LINSTEIN looked at Max carefully for a moment and then, waving his cigar hysterically, burst into a paroxysm of drunken mirth. Max smiled with him sympathetically. Wiping his streaming eyes, Linstein spluttered: "It's funny, Larkin. That stuff you put in my brandy . . . damned good brew wherever you got it. Venus?"

Max nodded. "So you saw me? It . . . loosens people up. You'll tell me what I want to know now, won't you?"

Linstein laughed again.

"That's the funny part. I'd have told you any time you asked. Go ahead—ask me."

"Right. First, is it true that de Passy left one successful experiment behind him,—his own child? Have Genetics got one of the super-geniuses he was trying to create?"

Linstein nodded owlshly. "Right enough."

"And they realise what they are handling?"

Drunkenly, Linstein tried to strike an attitude.

"World supremacy! That's what we're handling. That's what we've got. We're not forcing anything. They mature late, you know. At present the

super-genius is still . . . playing with toys. But inside ten years . . . You'll see."

Max said softly: "Third and last question—where is he?"

He waited patiently for Linstein to stop laughing. At last, gasping, Linstein said:

"You see, Larkin, we've been expecting all this. In fact, we were planning on it. I was retired to attract this sort of thing. It's been damned funny watching you the last month."

Max said: "You haven't answered my question."

"I can't! They wouldn't have dared use me for this job if I knew anything more than I've told you just now. Larkin. Every room of this apartment has a vidiphone camera relaying back to Genetics H.Q. Sight and sound. They suspected United Chemicals might have another agent up their sleeve—now they know." The high electric buzz of the apartment's front door sounded through the air. Linstein said muzzily: "They're coming for you, Larkin. I'm afraid they're coming for you."

He watched in smiling intoxication as Max went to the door. His succeeding amazement was rather pitiful. The two figures in U.C. uniform tramped in behind Max. Max said:

"The camera's concealed in that fifth plastic globe. This room was empty yesterday evening. Duplicate that record and fix it in for to-night. You jammed the direct transmission all right?"

The taller of the two men nodded.

"Unshielded radio ray sculptor two apartments along. It jammed everything for three blocks. There'll be a hefty fine to pay."

Out of a throat suddenly dry Linstein said:

"You're letting me hear all this. Does that mean . . . ? Are you going to . . . ?"

Max smiled sadly. "I never knock off an old college pal—when I can avoid it. We may not be biologists but we're not completely dumb at U.C. Just a little deep hypnosis. You'll wake in the morning and you will remember that we spent a cheerful evening together at the Museum of Modert Art. I don't think even Genetics have cameras fixed there. All right, Karl, take care of him."

BEHIND Hewison on the vidiphone screen Max could see, through an open window, the rolling Austrian valley. He finished telling the Director what had happened.

"So," Hewison commented briefly.

"That's how it is," Max confirmed.

Hewison roused himself.

"You did well enough, Max. More than well enough. I don't think there's any more you can do. Even if Genetics don't tumble to you you've sucked Linstein of everything he could tell us. And we could hardly put you on to a fresh line. They'd have you taped from the start. Contact Section will have to take over again. I hope they can pull something out of the bag."

"I don't rate their chances high," Max told him. "Genetics are no slouches. They know what they've got and they're watching it pretty well."

Hewison nodded towards the screen. "Yes. I know."

Max said casually: "You don't want me back in Europe just yet, do you? I've got one or two things I'd like to attend to."

Hewison's head jerked up, hopeful and apprehensive.

"Max," he said, "if you've got a line on your own, tell me, tell your old friend, Duncan Hewison. Don't go running your head into anything without telling us." He paused. "If anything happened . . ."

Max grinned. ". . . There might be no way of getting the information back to my old friend, Director Duncan Hewison. Don't worry. It's practically nothing—the vaguest of ideas. If I get on to anything solid, you'll know. So long now."

He un-garbled, opened circuit, and switched off on the expostulating Hewison. Then, thoughtfully, he walked out of the vidiphone booth and over to a magazine stall.

HE left Linstein's apartment the following day, deriving some amusement from the look of bewilderment on Linstein's face when he said goodbye. He left the now fashionable Bermondsey and took a room in a broken-down Mayfair hotel. He quite easily identified the Genetics man who moved in after him the next day and took an early opportunity of chatting with him. Nova Publications were offering him a juicy contract for a book to be called "Eighteen Years among Venusian Savages." He played the late blossoming author to the last dregs of boredom. The Genetics contact man took it glassily but doggedly.

He stayed in the hotel more than a fortnight. By day he went from publisher to publisher, blatantly canvassing his projected autobiography, and in the evening told the results to his manfully sympathetic acquaintance. An awful lot of publishers were passing up the chance of the century; he felt he was going to spite them and take the Nova contract . . .

At Nova—Managing Director a certain William Renfrew whose son, in Long Province, Venus, had had reason to be grateful to Max Larkin—he took the lift to the roof and stepped into the waiting gyro. Renfrew stood beside him. He said:

"He's a good enough double, then?"

"Excellent," Max said. "I've been wearing those dark glasses ever since they turned on the full heat wave. Have him go for his lunch to the Central Automat. After that, it doesn't matter. I'll have all the time I need."

William Renfrew said doubtfully: "Are you sure you know what you're doing? I could get Hewison for you on the office vidiphone . . ."

Max said: "This is serious. It's serious enough to get me up in a gyro; something I'd forsworn for the rest of my life. And it's too serious to let Hewison in on until I'm ready and willing. If anything goes wrong . . . You know the time limit."

He rocked the gyro up in a dizzy, perpendicular take-off. Beneath, Renfrew's face became a blur, the whole roof shrank, the shining new roofs of Bermondsey split up into glaring, allumin-alloy chasms, and then slowly coalesced again into a uniform gleam of metal. He headed north. Away on his left he saw the earth erupt in scarlet flowers of flame, flinging skywards the silver seed that was the morning passenger liner—London to Venusberg. It was a fascinating sight. It had fascinated him in just the same way more

than thirty years ago when, a small boy he had lived in his parents' home on the edge of the spaceport and known his future with a passionate certainty. He was going to be a space navigator. Strange, he thought now, that that had been his ambition rather than the more immediately romantic pilot. Probably that slight aberration had been part of the conviction that it would come true. But his father had been posted to Europe and the years had gone by in which certainty's edge was dulled. There was nothing in the idea now but ludicrousness, and a faint envy for that lost single-heartedness. Instead, Max reflected, having earned his retirement, he was volunteering for another profession admired by the very young—that of secret agent. But he had never admired it himself, and he felt now only a sick anxiety to finish a distasteful job.

HE arrowed down carefully to the small township, made the one necessary enquiry at the small mail-office and lifted the gyro clear again. He followed the rough trail he had been given. Just under the brow of the hill he parked the gyro and walked up through the leaning rocks. The guard, leaning on his Klaberg rifle, watched him as he approached.

The guard said: "Sorry, sir. Private ground. Atomics compound. You better turn back to the village."

Protective mimicry to the last detail. Smart, Max thought.

He said: "Where are the others? I want to see you all together."

He flashed the small badge, an ingenious duplicate of the one that had been found on a thin chain round Linstein's neck. It was gold with "GD" in large letters in the centre and the smaller superscription round it—"Contact Section." That had been a useful find. The guard nodded respectfully and flicked the small dial on his wrist to the Attention Call. Two other figures came out from the small hut in front of the larger squat building built back into the hill side. A third followed them from the main building itself. They all wore plain uniforms; the third, Max noticed, was a woman.

They stood, close grouped, in front of him.

"About the patient . . ." he began.

He lifted his right hand. Very gently he shook it, breaking the small capsule as though he were pronouncing a benediction on them all. The four figures stared at him as the faint mist swirled out from his hand, blanketing him first and stretching on towards them. Still watching they slumped, like collapsing dolls, into limp paralysis.

Max stepped round their bodies. He walked quite slowly past the guard but and up to the main building. It was quite a sizeable affair. It enclosed an inner courtyard, with a swimming pool and tennis courts. He walked through the hall and paused at an open door, looking inwards. What he saw made him halt, for several seconds, before he advanced.

The figure on the divan turned round as he entered the room. Max nodded gravely.

"Good day," he said. "Good day, *Miss de Passy*!"

HELEN DE PASSY said: "It was bright of you to find me."

He was wondering what he had really expected to find. A misshapen monstrosity with a bulging head and weak, helpless limbs? Something like that. Irrational, of course, but the mind was, in so many ways, irrational.

Certainly not a girl, though there was again no reason why it should have been more probable for de Passy to leave a son rather than a daughter. And now . . . a beautiful girl. She was beautiful, all right; strong and straight-limbed with the figure of a young, vigorous and lovely woman. It should not affect things, but it did. Her face was full under a good but not distorted forehead; her hair fell to shoulder length in thick coils of silk. Only about her chin was there a suspicion of weakness, of attractive weakness. He tried to find the key to her appearance, stumbled, and found it. Placidness. It was not a quality one would associate in advance with super-genius.

He became aware more clearly of what she was saying, and found an answer.

"It was something Linstein said." He remembered the purple walls of Linstein's ornate apartment, and the drunken boasting. "He said that the super-genius was still . . . playing with toys. I guessed what that meant. Linstein was a scientist. And for scientists toys can often mean the arts. It might be that the super-genius had turned first towards Keats and Shakespeare and Beethoven rather than towards Darwin and Planck." Max paused. "The artistic genius needs to publish, to toss its talent into the world's lap. I enquired discreetly. I found half a dozen brilliant writers working through different publishers. I found that each of them used the accommodation address of a certain Hampshire village. After that it was easy."

Helen de Passy said: "And the guards?"

Max said: "Leothine. It's the stunning vapour used by the Martian trapping plants. You can immunise yourself with half a dozen microscopic doses. They'll be out for . . . perhaps six hours."

She nodded. Max said softly:

"I still don't see why they let you publish. I saw it as a long chance, and it came off. But I don't understand why they let you."

She smiled. "Who reads books? A few hundred thousand. And, of course, for them they were toys. They never thought of anything but scientific genius. You humour genius—when you can do it without inconvenience. And their bureaucracy defeated itself, too. They granted permission for me to publish non-revealing material pseudonymously from the village. They didn't expect me to be prolific enough for seven different personalities—you missed one—and the little people didn't see the danger.

Her words echoed in his ears. ". . . for them they were toys. They never thought of anything but scientific genius . . ." Was there a solution here—an easy way out? His pulses leaped but he said evenly:

"Did they make an even bigger mistake? Your—genius. You will know. Is it purely artistic?"

She looked at him and he felt for a moment like a child campaigning against the inscrutable, triumphant world of the adult. In that look all incredulity fell away. He knew what she was, and wanted to worship.

She said: "No." She smiled. "You chose your time well. I've only just begun to get—interested in science. At the moment I'm studying Renthal's Theory of Polar Optics."

HOPE faded. He said desperately:

"What do you think's going to happen to you? Were you willing to be used by Genetics. Did you know their plans?"

BALANCE

She stood up. She was wearing a spun-glass dress that went with the curves of her body. A strand of her hair danced briefly in a breeze from the open door.

She said: "You can't imagine how lonely I am. Right from the start I've been lonely." She looked directly at him. "Can you imagine how you would have felt if from infancy you had been tended, watched, guarded by—*apes*!"

In the last word there was misery and the glimpse of an alien remoteness that frightened him. She went on bitterly.

"Did I know their plans? How could I help knowing them? For years I withdrew from them, writing words and music that to them were nothing, knowing that I had as strong a hold on them as they had on me. They could not force me; they dared not threaten. Only lately,"—she hesitated briefly—"only lately have I come to realise that—they are not my responsibility."

She lowered her voice on the last five words.

Max echoed: "Your responsibility?"

"Yes," she said. "Imagine again. You are a child, with apish guardians. They suspect your nature and your power to put weapons into their hands. That is all they want from you—not truth but power. How long, knowing what is best for them, will you withhold those gifts? How long before you forget mercy and responsibility and give them what they ask for?"

She paused again. "My father—" She hesitated over the word. "My father only thought of the fruits of genius. To him it was a weakness that Einstein, mathematics apart, was a gentle, simple man. He did not realise that without that simplicity he could not have lived in this world. A man can advance beyond his fellows in one field of knowledge and still have points of contact with them. For me—for the super-genius"—she spoke the word bitterly—"there can be no contact. It is hard to prevent pity turning to contempt."

Max said: "If he had lived . . . there might have been others. Have you thought of carrying on his work?"

She said: "They warned me about that. It was your people who killed him but Genetics would have done it themselves if you had failed. They wanted a sport to give them power; not a new race to supplant them."

Max said: "What are you going to do?"

She smiled dreamily. "Renthal's Polar Optics. There's an interesting line that can be applied fairly easily. The human retina can handle practically any light impulses in the fabric of the normal space-time continuum—any reasonably economical concentration. But Renthal's warped light is rather a different matter. I can rig it up into a pocket transmitter." She laughed. "The apes want matches; it isn't my fault if they burn each other's eyes out with them."

MAX said: "In a moment or two I'm going to call a U.C. Director on your vidiphone. I can have U.C. planes here to pick you up within an hour. I'll see you have a place of your own where you can do what you want—without interference. You can duplicate your father's work. You can have . . . children like yourself."

He looked at her, framing this last appeal.

"Will you come with me?"

She said indifferently: "I'll come. But not for those reasons. Would I

be left alone? Would I be allowed to populate the world with my own kind? You know your superiors. Are they any more anxious than Genetics to be dispossessed?" She smiled. "Given the means to gain supremacy, would they refuse to take them?"

Max thought of Hewison, and of the whole tortuous balance of power between the Companies. He had fought for U.C. when first Atomics and then Genetics Division had seemed to be gaining the whole of that power. Did that mean that he wanted United Chemicals to have it?

He knew she was right. A pocket transmitter radiating blindness? He could imagine Hewison's logical arguments that such a thing must be kept—for use, of course, only in a sudden emergency. And then, inevitably, the emergency. He could imagine Hewison's rationalisations as U.C. pushed itself inexorably above the other Companies. For himself, too, there would be the inevitable corruption of power—power, in his case, to ignore the world more and more completely, to withdraw into the past and leave the squabbling very far behind. Hewison would pay him well for a prize like this. All Tuscany, if he wanted it, for a pleasure ground; Naples for a footstool. For a moment of madness he thought it might be worth it.

He said to Helen de Passy:

"Don't you care at all what happens?"

She shook her head silently. In the courtyard outside a chiming sundial flung bells of sound through the unemphatic air.

Max said, almost pleadingly:

"That analogy of yours—between men and apes—it isn't sound, you

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know. There may be a correlation of intellect between you and us and them, but there's more to it than that. An ape is not evil, and not good. Men are both. Because you are what you are you have seen the evil, but the good exists also."

She looked at him indifferently.

"You are arguing away from reality. There is no alternative. There is nowhere I could go where I would be unnoticed and left alone. Men would find me, because they want the power I can give them."

He said: "At least . . . you could renounce one part of you. Music, literature, painting—these neither blind nor destroy. You could keep to them."

She said: "Genetics allowed me to do that because they thought I was still immature. Would Genetics—or any other Company—permit it once they suspected I was withholding things? There are means of persuasion and"—she flushed faintly—"I am sensitive to pain. You must face facts. I may be a freak, an accident, but I exist and men will use me. For me it doesn't matter because in my loneliness I can find comfort only in playing with the toys of my mind. For men those toys may be weapons and misery, but that is not my concern. The only thing you can do is serve your Company and take your reward."

SHE gestured towards the vidiphone. Reluctantly, automatically, he moved towards it, switched on, set the dials. The only thing? He watched Hewison's face swim up into its usual, anxious lines.

Hewison said: "Where are you? What's happening?"

Max said slowly: "I found de Passy's child. A girl. You needn't worry now."

Hewison said shrewdly: "Where? I'll have men to pick you both up within an hour."

"Don't bother," Max said. "I've got a gyro. And Miss de Passy"—he hesitated very briefly—"was unfortunately killed in the skirmish. I just wanted to reassure you."

He saw the chagrin mounting in Hewison's face as he switched the vidiphone off.

Helen de Passy said softly:

"Do you think you can hide me?"

Max shook his head.

"No," he said. "I couldn't hide you any more than I could hide the sun."

She said, without concern:

"Then? Are you looking for a higher bidder?"

He took the pocket Klaberg from its holster and weighed it carefully in his hand. A fugitive sunbeam licked at its metal.

He said: "There is only one bidder for you now. I don't like doing this. I'm a squeamish man and it doesn't help that you are a young and lovely woman. But I know that man lives always on the very edge of tyranny and I know that liberty cannot survive . . . if you live. In a way it's better for you, also."

He always remembered how she stood, a lonely goddess, inscrutably smiling as he raised the weapon against her.

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